

SUMMARY: The story continues after the 6th year and Dumbledore's death. Harry is committed to find Horcruxes, but he's found something else instead.

Basically he and others are all more or less what JKR made them to be, but now in different circumstances. Harry will find he's got some new talents, but nothing that wasn't already hinted by JKR, who by the way owns all magical characters in this story. Yes, there are ships too, but later and only a little bit, for now.

I'd really like to know what in this story you liked, what you didn't and especially what you'd like to be different.

Hope you'll have as much fun reading it as I have writing it.

Prologue

The young man could feel the anger. The fury. He could feel time changing as he floated along helplessly.

Harry, someone screamed. Harry! Help me!

As he whizzed through time and space, he tried to figure out who was yelling. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move.

Images flashed through his mind. Red hair. A Grim. People laughing. Screaming. Being hugged. A little girl who had green eyes.

But most of all for he could remember crying for someone who didn't answer him.

A few days earlier

"Hermione," the boy named Harry said. "I have something to show you."

Something in his voice made her look at him sharply.

"What?" she said. "What is it?"

"That's the problem..." Harry hesitated. "I don't know."

“Well, I hope you didn’t touch it.”

“Of course not! I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Where is it then?” she snapped impatiently.

Hermione had been very irritable lately. “I’m just sitting around doing *nothing!*” she liked to moan. “Like I’m *useless* or something!”

“It’s in my room.” Harry tried to soothe her. “I’ll show it to you.”

The look on his face was that of someone who had found a treasure map, but had no idea how to read it. His eyes shone with excitement.

Hermione rushed upstairs, with Harry at her heels. Harry’s room was the same one he had shared with Ron the summer before his fifth year. Ron was away, helping his mother arrange his eldest brother’s wedding. Judging from Ron’s letters, Harry figured that detention with Snape, the former potions master, would be more enjoyable. (“Seriously Mum, you can’t expect me to wear *this* at the wedding?” Harry could almost hear him yelling.)

But now, his thoughts were far away from Ron’s house, the Burrow. He opened his chest and took a small box out.

“It’s inside.” Harry held the box in his hands.

“It’s a very beautiful box Harry,” Hermione said sarcastically. “May I go now?”

“Sorry...I’m just very nervous. You open it, would you?”

“Oh, very well then.” She did.

Inside was an emerald green, gleaming stone. Its surface was perfectly smooth and shiny.

“What is it Harry? Where did you get it?”

“I’m not certain. I followed some clues, looking for Horcruxes.
“Hermione looked at him.

"I promised professor Dumbledore that I'd tell no one, including you and Ron. But this isn't a Horcrux."

"And now, when the heroic part is done, you want your little library moth to search in the Blacks' library and find out what it is?" said Hermione coldly, but she couldn't hide her anger.

"Hermione...I'm sorry. It's not like that." He paused. "You see, Sirius died in front of my eyes, and then professor Dumbledore. They both died protecting me. I can't even think of losing you or Ron."

Hermione stared at him for a while. "I'll see what I can find." Her voice was a little bit softer.

sss

"It's *Lia Fail*," said Hermione the next morning during breakfast. "Would you pass me the juice please?" She was falsely casual.

"And now I'm supposed to know what Lia F... whatever is?"

"It's one of the four magical wonders of ancient times. Long before Merlin and others had come. It's also called 'Stone of Destiny'." Hermione seemed more like herself now.

"You enjoy knowing something that nobody else does, don't you? What does it do?"

"It was created with a purpose to reveal who was the rightful king of Ireland. But it can also bring you to any point in time you command."

"But how?"

"That's the tricky part. Command words are written in the stone itself."

"Hermione, *please*."

"In those times, there had been only a few wizards and they hadn't known all the magic we do today." Hermione said proudly, almost triumphantly. "I'll show you in your room."

sss

Like all other rooms in Black's house, Harry's also had heavy curtains. They were closed now and the only light in the room was coming from the stone and the half sphere above it that was glowing in thousands of tiny particles of light. Like a conductor in front of an orchestra, Hermione was moving those particles with the wave of her wand.

"It's beautiful. But what is it?" Harry asked.

"It's the night sky. When you arrange the stars the way they were at the time you want to leap in, the Stone will bring you there. You'll appear at the same place as you are in present at the sunset of that day, and you'll come back at the sunrise next day."

"How do you know where the stars were on some day?" Asked Harry, knowing instantly that the question was stupid and that he'd hear another lecture.

"From ephemerides. If you didn't give up of Divination lessons you'd know."

At the mention of Divination lessons, something crossed Harry's mind like lightening. Hermione continued like she had a class in front of herself.

"The stone says that you can go wherever you please, but don't do anything, or you'll be cursed by Destiny."

"Like I'm not cursed already." Harry resolutely turned to Hermione. "We must go to Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade?" Hermione was puzzled.

"It was in The Hog's Head where Professor Trelawney told the prophecy to Professor Dumbledore, and Snape overheard it. If that hadn't happened, Voldemort would have never been after my parents. If I prevent it from being told, my parents would be alive, and perhaps Sirius and Professor Dumbledore as well." With every word Harry spoke more and more passionately.

"Harry, you mustn't change the past, or you'll be cursed forever."

"Hermione, I *am* cursed!" He cried. "But you're right" he added in lower voice, "You don't have to be too. I should go alone."

"Oh no, you won't!" Hermione stood up. "If you're so silly to do it, I'll be there to watch your back!"

"I knew you would." Harry grinned.

sss

Harry and Hermione stood in Hogsmaide just across The Hog's Head. They'd managed to sneak out from Grimmauld Place unnoticed after lunch and were waiting beneath the Invisibility Cloak for sunset to activate the stone. Hermione had already found positions of the planets and set up the "sky".

"Harry, are you sure you want to do this?" Hermione tried to reason him one more time. "Once we use the stone it will disappear and most probably we won't find it ever again. If you do something there, it can't be undone. And at that moment you'll be thrown back to our time, but nothing there will be the same!"

"I've never been so sure in my life. What about you?"

"I won't stay behind." She sighed. "It's time."

She tapped the stone with her wand muttering a spell Harry couldn't recognize. Diagon Alley started spinning and changing shape. They felt like they were in the middle of a vortex that was sucking in everything around them. The feeling of dissolution became almost unbearable and then, suddenly everything calmed down. Harry and Hermione were standing at the same place only without the cloak.

The lanterns could hardly shed any light through the thick fog. Harry and Hermione made their way towards Hog's Head inn. Harry was too afraid to miss spotting professor Dumbledore to pay much attention to his surroundings. Finally he saw him making his way through the crowd.

"There he is." he whispered to Hermione "Let's go inside."

As they stepped in the Hog's Head, a few wizards and witches glanced at them suspiciously and then turned back.

"Relax Harry," Hermione said quietly when they finally found a free table and sat, "Nobody knows you here, yet. You are about to be born next year, remember?"

"Of course I do. It's just awkward. The last time I was here most of these people wanted to shake my hand or say something."

"Miss Trelawney? Should be in any minute now."

Harry was nervous. He didn't have a plan how to stop her from telling the Prophecy. He looked towards the back rooms. There was no one in the passage. *"If only I could sneak there and ambush Professor Trelawney before she meets Professor Dumbledore."* ran through his head.

At that moment Professor Trelawney entered The Hog's Head.

"You stay here and make a noise when she comes near the stairs." Harry told Hermione and left towards the backroom trying to hide below the stairs that lead to the upper floor.

When Professor Trelawney approached, she heard a sound from the main room, and turned to see what it was. One of the tables was set on fire and people around it jumped knocking their chairs down. That moment she became as stiff as a board and fell to the floor.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry was still in the shadow when he cast the memory charm. By that time half a dozen wizards and witches surrounded him pointing their wands. Harry was smiling. He put his wand back in his robes and raised his hands. Harry caught Hermione's frightened look in the crowd.

"Thank you." he mouthed. She grinned at him worriedly.

Suddenly the whole Hogsmade started spinning around him. He knew he'd succeeded. He had changed the past.

Then his life started passing in front of his eyes. Harry saw the flash of green light, the baby carried on the flying motorcycle, the skinny boy in the cupboard. He could feel the anger. The fury. He could feel time changing as he floated along helplessly.

Harry, someone screamed. Harry! Help me!

As he whizzed through time and space, he tried to figure out who was yelling. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move.

Images flashed through his mind. Red hair. A Grim. People laughing. Screaming. Being hugged. A little girl who had green eyes.

But most of all for he could remember crying for someone who didn't answer him.

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 1 "WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

Harry woke up. His head was pounding. Looking around he found for a moment he had no idea where he was. Then everything came rushing back to him like an avalanche.

"I HAVE A SISTER!" Thundered in his head.

Then Harry felt unbearable pain realizing his parents were dead, killed two days before his eleventh birthday. Killed in the last battle of an already lost war. He remembered. He remembered that day when the Death Eaters victoriously came into their- Harry's and his sister Rose's - hideout. Harry remembered Rose being torn from his arms, and the mad cackle of the Death Eaters as they taunted him:

"You'll never see your *baby* sister again! Half-blood."

"Oboediens totalis!"

Suddenly he understood this was an enslavement curse. All the years of humiliation and misery without a sign of resistance. They replaced house-elves in the Death Eaters' houses. But now he didn't feel helpless and docile anymore.

"WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

He understood that without the curse that backfired from Harry, Voldemort gained more power and more followers as time went by. Eventually he prevailed and his army killed everyone who was not on his side. The last battle took Harry's parents, Dumbledore and many other good people. Children became slaves and were treated like scum.

Harry turned around. He could barely see bodies lying on the floor, covered only by thin moth eaten blankets. The air was stale and stinky. He knew he was in the Malfoy's manor cellar. Harry felt pain from his bruises. No matter that the slave children were perfectly obedient, they were occasionally beaten by the house-elves just for the fun of it. He heard the sound of the door opening, and light flooded into the room.

“GET UP YOU LAZY LOT!” The ugly house-elf sneered nastily kicking the body next to him.

“UNLESS YOU WANT TO GO TO BED HUNGRY TODAY!”

This was an overstatement since they were hungry all the time, and of course they could see bed only while cleaning their masters' bedrooms.

“What have I done?” Harry thought again. *“I should have listened to Hermione”*

“What happened to her?” But he knew the answer. Since Voldemort became all-powerful no Muggle-borns were ever invited to the Wizarding world.

“Well, at least she is safe... I hope.”

“BUT SHE MUST REMEMBER EVERYTHING LIKE I DO!”

sss

At number 30 Horseshoe Close; a teenage girl woke up much earlier than usual for the summer holidays.

“HARRY! HARRY!” She screamed. Hermione looked around in disbelief still not understanding where she was.

“What’s wrong honey?” Her mother asked rushing to her room.

“MUM! HOW DID YOU GET HERE?”

“Through the door actually.” Mrs. Granger replied raising her eyebrows. “Are you all right?”

“BUT THIS IS MY ROOM! WHAT AM I DOING HERE?”

“Well, you usually sleep here ever since we moved last year.”

“BUT WHERE’S HARRY?” Hermione shrieked hysterically.

"If there is something you've got to tell me Hermione Granger, you better speak right now. And who's Harry anyways?"

"Harry and Ron are..." Hermione stopped suddenly. It all came to her. She remembered everything. Being a golden girl, who could understand and learn everything except how to fit in. Her mother looked at her with a bemused expression on her face.

"Yes?" She placed her hands on her hips.

Hermione needed some time alone to think things over.

"Harry and Ron are characters in the story I was making up last night. I was dreaming about them. That's all. Sorry Mum."

"Perhaps you should spend more time with your friends then with your stories." She added in a softer voice: "I worry about you."

"I'm OK! Leave me alone, will you, it's my life!"

sss

Until that morning, Harry would accept being the Malfoy's slave without defiance, but now that thought became unbearable.

"The curse is not working anymore.

I have to get out of here.

I need a wand.

I need a plan."

Harry realised he had to behave like the others until he thought of something.

"YOU. GET YOUR ASS OVER HERE AND HELP MASTER'S GUESTS WITH THE BAGGAGE."

He hurried upstairs to the entrance door. Lucius Malfoy stood there in ceremonial robes looking *very* angry. Strangely, he didn't notice Harry.

The next moment the carriage arrived. Harry could see six Thestrals pulling the carriage, a grim reminder to the worst memories of his life.

"Your excellency." Lucius inclined his head to a woman Harry recognized as Dolores Umbridge.

"Lord Malfoy. I still don't know why this place is better than my office at the Ministry." She dumped her baggage onto Harry.

"Thanks to my *dear* cousin Sirius and his werewolf sidekick, we have to keep this meeting in secret, and you know that very well Dolores darling. And if your *precious* Ministry did its job, we wouldn't be in this mess." Bellatrix Lestrange stepped out of the carriage. "It is nice to see you again Lucius."

"Pleasure is all mine, Bella." Lucius kissed her hand.

Harry's heart sunk.

"*Sirius and Remus are still alive!*" A wave of hope washed over him. But then he stared at the next person that was coming from the carriage – Horace Slughorn.

"Good morning Headmaster. I hope the trip was comfortable. I wish you all the warmest welcome to my home. Please do come in."

Harry followed carrying their baggage.

"It is most unfortunate that we have all those incidents around Hogwarts just two weeks before the start of term." Harry could hear Slughorn say. "If the Ministry could arrange to clear the Forbidden Forest around the school area, we would feel way more secure."

"The last thing we want right now is the Centaurs at war. It is out of the question." Umbridge snapped.

Before Harry could hear anything else they disappeared into the library. He carried the luggage into the guest rooms.

His heart was beating. Sirius and Remus survived and kept on fighting. He had to find them. He just had to. Then he realised that all

these years he must have heard many conversations like that one, but being under the curse he just didn't notice.

Harry was thinking. *"I've got to find out more about what's going on, before I plan any escape. If I find them, I can find Rose. But I've got to pretend I'm still cursed."*

When he came downstairs, he intentionally passed by the kitchens hoping he would be ordered to bring the breakfast into the library. It actually worked and off he went back to the library, carrying toast, eggs and bacon along with a large kettle of tea.

"And this is my collection of wands." Lucius was saying, standing proudly in front of his trophy-shelves "that I took from the blood-traitors I slew. But *this* one is really special."

Harry's ears pricked up while he was *slowly* serving the breakfast. Lucius' voice was excited and smug.

"It took me a lot of time and money to get it, but it is finally mine."

"So what's so special about it?" asked Umbridge impatiently.

"Well, just the fact that it's the only wand that has the feather taken from the very same phoenix as the one in the Dark Lord's wand. It is a twin."

A stunned silence followed, interrupted only by Harry pouring the tea.

"That's my wand." His hand trembled slightly but luckily no one noticed.

"And did you try to use it?" Slughorn finally broke the silence.

"Of course not. Only the Dark Lord can use a wand like this."

"And me." Harry almost spoke it out loud.

"Anything else master?" Harry tried his best to keep his voice even.

"NO! Why are you still here? Get out!" 'Master' shouted. "At least house elves knew their manners."

Harry bowed and left the room backwards.

sss

For the next few days, Harry tried to gather as much information as possible. It was not too difficult, because no one paid any attention to the slaves. However, he couldn't find much more than he learned the first day except that no one could be in the library without Malfoy's presence.

sss

It was Harry's turn to serve the breakfast the morning when Draco came home from a summer camp. His parents were waiting in front of the main entrance.

"Mum, dad! Look who is here!" Through the open window Harry could see Oliver Wood stepping down from the carriage. He wore the robe of the local professional Quiddich team. Harry was already used to see once decent people on Death Eater's side. However it would always make him feel sick.

"Welcome Oliver." Narcissa was smiling. "I've heard you signed your first professional contract! Congratulations!"

"Thank you Lady Malfoy. I hope we'll have Draco next season. Everybody in the camp wanted to meet him. With the best seeker in the history of Hogwarts, we can't miss the Cup!" Oliver was excited. Then he turned to Lucius. "Good morning Lord Malfoy."

Lucius remained reserved. "Let's go to the dining room, shall we?"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Draco Malfoy is the best seeker in history of Hogwarts!

"WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

After breakfast Lucius called Draco to join him in horseback riding. Harry followed them pretending he had some stable duty. They didn't pay attention to him as usual.

As they came closer to the stables Lucius broke the silence.

“Do you really think I’ll let you ruin your life and career by playing Quiddich?”

“And do you really think I’ll even care for your permission?” Draco’s face turned purple. “Soon I won’t be underage anymore and I can do what I want! And I want to play Quiddich!”

“Are you mad? I have great plans for you. Everything I’ve done I’ve done for *you*. To make *you* successful, to make *you* powerful.”

“You mean to make *yourself* powerful. I know what you are doing. Everybody hates you. You wanted me to be popular, to play Quiddich so that everybody likes me. Then I can become what you cannot. So you can have influence through me. Well father, I have news for you! I want to have my own life. And there’s not too much room for your dirty games in it!”

“How dare you to talk to me like that? I can disown you at will!”

“Ha, and let everyone know that you failed as a father!” Draco laughed at his face. “No father, I don’t think so. You’ll be sitting proud in your VIW chair watching me win the Cup. That’s what you’ll do. And I don’t feel like riding anymore. See you at lunch.” Draco left his father without waiting for the answer.

Lucius turned around and when he spotted Harry he raised his crop and hit him mercilessly. Still visibly angry Lucius got on the horse and galloped across the field.

sss

It was Saturday afternoon while he was polishing the trophy room in the eastern wing of the manor, when Harry first heard the voice.

“Every year the same thing... Everybody’s going up and down the stairs...I can’t wait until they all leave so I can sleep in peace again.”

Harry came closer to the wall following the voice. Instantly he knew it was Parseltongue. It seemed it was coming from the portrait of a

Malfoy ancestor. Trying to hear better, he put his ear against the portrait leaning his hands on the frame.

Suddenly, the portrait swung around and he almost fell into the passageway. Harry stared for a few moments hesitating, but still he stepped in.

Since he woke up that morning, Harry was trying to find a way to escape. All entries were carefully guarded around the clock for the fear of the rebels breaking in. Even with a wand he wouldn't stand a chance. Finding the secret passage had awakened fresh hope in him.

Harry began crawling because the passage turned into a tunnel three feet high. By then Harry couldn't see a thing.

He had a strange feeling he was being watched. Raising his head, he could see a pair of bright, yellow eyes staring at him from the darkness.

CHAPTER 2 – UNEXPECTED ALLY

“Good morning Miss Granger” Mrs. Hobbs smiled at Hermione, taking off her glasses. “To what do I owe this pleasure? Please do sit down.”

Mrs. Hobbs was the school counselor. She was an old, fat lady that knew everything that was going on in the school.

“Actually, it’s not a pleasure at all.” Hermione hesitated, still standing.

“Tell me what’s wrong. And don’t just stand there. Sit down. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

Hermione sat nervously looking at her hands.

“I don’t know how to begin.” It was probably the first time that she said, “I don’t know” in school.

“It’s like I have memories of an entirely different life.”

“Go on.” Mrs. Hobbs encouraged her in a soft tone of voice.

“It’s very detailed... like I actually lived it, but it’s not possible. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“When did it start?”

“Two weeks ago I woke up from a dream. At least I think it was a dream. But now I am completely obsessed. I can’t focus on anything in my real life. I don’t know what to do.”

“Did you talk to your parents?” Mrs. Hobbs’ face didn’t reveal any surprise or concern.

“No, of course not!” Hermione exclaimed turning pale. “I hope you won’t...”

“Don’t worry my child. Everything you say here is strictly confidential. Just relax and tell me everything.”

“I’m so confused... I think I’m going crazy.” Hermione couldn’t look Mrs. Hobbs in the eye.

"I'll tell you what we are going to do. I'll recommend you to my dear friend and *brilliant* therapist, Dr Susan Andersen. I believe you'll be more relaxed talking to her. I'll arrange everything and your parents don't need to know for now. There must be a reasonable explanation for all this and she *will* find it. You are certainly not going crazy." Mrs. Hobbs was dialing the phone.

Hermione didn't hear a word of the conversation over the phone. Her thoughts were far away, back in Hogwarts.

&&&

"Interesting. Very, very interesting. Just a slave boy and yet he can resist my hypnotizing gaze."

"I'm not a slave!"

"You speak the language of snakes boy?"

Even in the dark, Harry could see her eyes widen in surprise.

"Potter" He hissed. *"Harry Potter. And you are?"*

"Temper, temper." She chided. *"My name is Athena. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."*

"I'd like to say that the pleasure is all mine, but nothing is pleasurable in my life."

"Indeed. But wait, you are supposed to be under the curse, are you not?"

"As a matter of fact I was until..." How could he explain to the serpent what *really* happened?

"Until what?" Harry could hear curiosity in her voice.

It took a while before Harry managed to explain to Athena about the stone and changing the past.

"My, my, I haven't had so much excitement in over sixty years."

"If Professor Dumbledore was here he'd know what to do."

"Oh, I remember Albus! Such a fine boy, and a brilliant student of course."

"You know Professor Dumbledore?!"

"By all means. He was one of my favorite students. Back when I was Headmistress."

"But you are..."

"A snake? But I prefer to be called a serpent. You have guessed by now that I am an Animagus. "

"But, why are you..."

"It is much more comfortable being a serpent, but you know that already, don't you?"

"How on earth could I know that?" Harry asked bewildered.

"But you are practically one yourself. I can tell. Shouldn't you be getting back? Someone will notice you are missing."

"Nobody ever notices slaves."

&&&

Hermione opened the door with the golden letters "Dr Susan Andersen Ph.D." and stepped in. The room was unexpectedly cozy and casual, with two walls completely covered with books and some paintings.

"Hello, you must be Hermione Granger? I'm Doctor Susan Andersen. Mrs. Hobbs told me a lot about you."

"Good morning, I mean afternoon. I heard a lot about you, I mean read a lot. And all your books, they're so great of course and your latest article 'High school gangs – causes and reasons why they exist'. It's so fantastic and so *realistic*. I'd just like to thank you for taking the time to help me. I mean you are so busy..."

She said this in one breath.

“Please make yourself comfortable.”

Hermione sat on the chair with an expression on her face like she was taking an exam.

“Tell me something about the life you say you have memories of. Do you have any friends there?”

“Yes, I do. One of them is Harry Potter. He’s very famous. He defeated Lord Voldemort – that’s the Dark Lord – when he was only one. Then there is Ron Weasley. He is the youngest son in a family of seven children. I’m also friends with his sister Ginny, Harry’s girlfriend.”

“Very well, now tell me about friends in your real life.”

Hermione tried to sustain herself from saying that those *were* her real friends.

“Well, I have many friends in school.”

“Are any of them as close as Harry and Ron?” Dr Andersen was making some notes.

“Not really. But they are good friends, though.” Hermione had to admit to herself that she wasn’t sure that any of them would name her as a close friend.

“And what about the Dark Lord you were talking about?”

“He calls himself Lord Voldemort, but his real name is Tom Riddle. His followers call themselves ‘Death Eaters’ and have a Dark Mark on their arms. He hates all Muggles – those are non magic people – and hardly anyone dares to speak his name.”

She continued talking about her life in Hogwarts more and more passionately. Dr Andersen didn’t interrupt her, writing something down from time to time.

&&&

In the next several days, Harry met Athena a few times. But besides some old stories she wouldn't tell anything useful. He eagerly tried to find out what she meant by saying he was practically a serpent.

"Are you going to explain to me what you meant by saying I was one myself?" Harry was determined not to let her avoid the topic.

"Oh, you just cannot figure it out yourself, can you?" Athena sounded amused.

"Figure out what?" He snapped impatiently.

"If you want to be a serpent you wish to become a serpent. You'll either become it at will or never learn how to do it at all. You see, only the serpent Animagus can resist a snake's hypnotizing gaze. Ever wondered why in your other world you were able to throw off the Imperius curse so easily?"

Harry gulped. The last thing he ever expected to be was a snake.

"Who would wish to be a snake!"

"Oh I don't know..." Athena hissed sarcastically. *"Perhaps someone who was enslaved for many years and would like nothing more than to escape from one of his worst enemies' manor."*

Harry was thunderstruck by those words. He *wanted* to escape. He *wanted* to become a serpent.

Immediately, he felt his skin itch and bubble. Resisting the urge to scratch, he stayed still. In a brief moment of panic he felt his bones deform and realign, along with sinews and organs. His snout (it could no longer be called a nose) stretched out in front of him and his ears disappeared from his head. He could feel his hand slipping down the wall of the passage and molding into his body. His legs too changed shape: They joined each other into a long tail. His robes melded into his body and formed a snakeskin. He tasted the air with his tongue

After a moment's disorientation, Harry opened his eyes to darkness.

He was a serpent. Athena was right. It was comfortable. And for the first time he could see her clearly with his newly dark vision.

"You see, it wasn't that hard." "But where are my clothes?"

"Don't worry; everything you had with you will be there when you are a human again. If you are foolish enough to become a human again."

"I have to find my sister. Voldemort has to be defeated."

"I realize now why you were sorted into Gryffindor."

"But first I have to pick up some items that don't belong to the Malfoys. My wand for instance." Harry ignored her comment.

Suddenly he realized that unusually for him some cunning thoughts were running through his head.

Later that evening while the Malfoys and their guests had dinner, a silvery shadow slipped down from the fireplace in Lucius' private library. It slid towards the trophy shelves and turned into a skinny teenage boy in rags. He collected all the items from the shelves and put them in his pockets. Next he made his way to a door. Muttering "*Alohamora*," he picked up the object stored inside.

Ten minutes later the same shadow crawled into Draco's room. The same boy took the Firebolt and some clothes from the closet and disappeared into the shadows.

"Are you sure you are not coming with me?"

"Quite sure. I'm too old for such an adventure. And after all this is my home."

Harry looked at her in amazement.

"Oh I've forgotten to tell you I am a Malfoy. Only I was disowned when I had refused to marry that pureblood peacock. Something like a white sheep in a black family."

"Just like Sirius."

“Do you know where you are going?”

“To London. I’ve got to find Hermione first. Thanks for all your help.”

“Nothing at all. Thank you for the excitement.”

Harry kicked off the ground. “Goodbye Athena!”

“Farewell Harry Potter. And good luck.”

He could feel the wind blowing at his face. Looking back all he could see of Malfoy Manor was the orange light from the flames that were licking through Lucius’ library windows.

Harry smiled spitefully. He was flying. He was free.

CHAPTER 3 – Putting Things In Place

Whenever the Malfoys had special guests the house-elves would serve dinner rather than slaves. But this time instead of announcing the dessert, the Head house-elf ran into the dinning room bowing and panting at the same time:

“Master, Master!”

A shadow of anger passed across Lucius's face. “What is it, you idiot?” he snapped.

“Your library... It's on fire!”

“Then why don't you do something about it?”

“But only Master can open the door!” The elf cried pitifully.

Lucius jumped from his chair. “Pardon me.”

He ruthlessly kicked the elf at the neck and stormed to the door, bumping into his son Draco.

“HOW DARE YOU TAKE MY FIREBOLT! IF YOU THINK IT'S GOING TO STOP ME FROM PLAYING QUIDDICH, YOU ARE *WRONG!* I'LL PLAY ON A SCHOOL BROOMSTICK IF I HAVE TO!”

“How did you break into and set my library on fire?” Lucius hissed through clenched teeth.

“What?!”

“Get out of my way!” He pushed his son aside and rushed down the hall.

Narcissa ran to her son and shook him by the shoulders. “What have you done? Do you know what's in there?”

“I haven't done anything! It wasn't me! I don't even know how to open the bloody door!”

“I better go help your father now.”

sss

“Exstinguere!” Lucius was putting out the fire. Seconds later Narcissa and the others joined him and soon the fire was extinguished.

“What’s that?” Slughorn asked pointing at a symbol shaped like a lightening bolt on the opposite wall.

Everybody stared at the wall. They’ve seen nothing like that before.

Only Lucius didn’t show any interest in the symbol. “My collection is gone! My books, everything ruined!”

“Is your *most* precious item safe?” Narcissa said anxiously.

“I don’t know. Only *he* can open the door.”

“Then you’ll have to report this yourself, before someone else does.” she gave the guests a sharp look.

Lucius did his best not to show his terror. Even after so many years of serving Voldemort, he was still frightened of him.

He turned to the guests. “We will investigate this in the morning. Right now I have some pressing matters to attend to.”

Bellatrix gave him a smug look.

“The Dark Lord won’t be pleased when he hears about this. He won’t be pleased at all.”

She didn’t even know how right she was.

sss

On the other side of the wall, a serpent grinned in the dark.

“Well, well. Who would say...well done Harry, well done.”

sss

Harry had to admit. Draco's Firebolt was a great broomstick. He couldn't resist making some moves such as the Wronski Feint. Then he remembered that Athena told him to head south and eventually he should see the lights of London. After that he'd be on his own.

The feeling of triumph was soon replaced by a tightening in his chest as he thought of his sister, his parents and what was ahead of him. He squeezed the Firebolt harder and bowed his head as he flew at full speed.

sss

Mr. and Mrs. Kline were peacefully sleeping in their new house. They bought it from their friends, a pair of dentists that moved with their teenage daughter to East London.

It was long after midnight when the silhouette slipped into their bedroom. Harry remembered Hermione's room very well, but this wasn't her room anymore. Stepping towards the bed he bumped into the coffee table. A big vase loudly shattered on the floor.

Mr. Kline switched on the light. He and Harry stared at each other.

"Who are you!"

"Who are *you*, young man? Call the police Esther dear." He jumped from his bed and grabbed Harry, who stood there like petrified.

Mr. Kline was a man with a strong build and had no problem holding Harry.

"But... but you don't understand. I must have missed the house."

"Oh yes, you've picked the wrong house all right. You can explain everything to the Police when they arrive."

Harry tried to pull himself together and think. He couldn't use his wand, and he stood no chance escaping from Mr. Kline's grip.

Unfortunately for Harry the police patrol was just around the corner and they arrived before he remembered that he could turn into a snake.

While sitting in the backseat he was thinking that the Grangers must have moved elsewhere. The only way to find them was to call Hermione on the phone, once they let him make a call.

He was thinking how it would be to call Aunt Petunia instead...

"Hello, Aunt Petunia, this is Harry."

"Harry who?"

"Harry Potter, your nephew. Lily's son."

"Who's Lily?"

"She's your sister, remember?"

"I have never had a sister named Lily! Never call this residence again, or I'll call the Police!"

"I'm already with the Police. I thought you could bail me out."

Click.

If this was what would happen if he talked to Aunt Petunia, Harry would hate to think of what would happen if Uncle Vernon answered the phone.

He had to think of a cover story for the police. Fortunately he had shrunk the broomstick and the other items he took from Lucius's library and concealed them in his robes. No Muggle would be able to find them. Yet another one of the useful tricks he learnt from Fred and George.

sss

The phone rang in the Grangers flat.

"Hello." Hermione answered the phone from her room. It was unusual for the phone to ring so early.

"Hermione, it's me, Harry."

"*Who?*" Hermione went pale and her hands started shaking.

"What do you mean who? It's Harry."

"Is this some kind of joke? Cause it's not funny."

"What's wrong with you? Don't you remember me? I'm in the police station and I have my hearing today at 3:30 PM in the court."

"What court?"

"The hell I know. For minors or something. You've got to help me. They think I'm a burglar. I've been looking for you at your old place."

"This is ridiculous! What do you want from me?"

"To get me out. I can't tell you over the phone, but there are some important things about Voldemort that I have to talk to you about."

"Yeah right." Hermione hung up furiously.

There were angry tears in her eyes. *"How could she do this to me? And I trusted her!"*

sss

A brown haired teenage girl stormed into Dr Andersen's office.

"How could you do this to me?"

Dr Andersen looked up from her notes. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nobody knew those names except you. Nobody else heard about Harry and Voldemort!"

"What are you talking about? And please calm down."

“Don’t you calm me! I trusted you.”

“What happened?”

“Somebody phoned me saying he was Harry. He had to tell me something about Voldemort.”

“I am certain that nobody called you this morning on my behalf. And if it’s correct that you told nobody else, the only conclusion is that there was no such a call.”

“Of course I didn’t tell... What are you trying to say?”

“Well, it is too early for this, but since we started. You have a desperate need to have friends and an exiting life. I believe that you created that world to fill the void. You have to face the facts and learn to distinguish fantasy from reality.” Dr Andersen’s voice was calm but firm.

“It’s not a fantasy!”

“This is enough. In that case show me some of that magic of yours.”

“I don’t have my wand.”

“Oh, but there *must* be *some* magic that you can do without a wand.” She said mockingly.

Hermione was livid. “YOU THINK YOU KNOW EVERYTHING! YOU AND YOUR ENORMOUS EGO! SOMEBODY SHOULD PUT YOU IN YOUR PLACE!”

Suddenly Dr Andersen felt very strange. It seemed like someone pulled her table and she couldn’t reach it anymore. Her feet were off the floor and everything in the room was becoming bigger and bigger. She looked down in panic and realized that she was high above the carpet on some sort of platform that she recognized as her chair. She crawled backwards screaming.

Hermione looked at her in shock.

“Oh God! Accidental Magic!” She let the cry out.

Dr Andersen plugged her ears. It was obvious that Hermione’s voice was like a thunderstorm to her. That instant she fainted and remained lying on the office chair.

“I have to find Harry.” Hermione whispered to herself. “He must have a wand.”

In all previous weeks she was refusing to admit herself that life in Hogwarts was real, no matter the fact that she could remember every detail. She was brought up by her parents to believe in science and facts. She tried to find a logical, or should we say “Muggle” explanation for all her memories. Eventually she reached for professional help in desperate attempt to find some sense in everything. Now when magic happened in front of her eyes she was relieved. All the time she wished with all her heart that Hogwarts, Harry and Ron were real.

Hermione looked at her watch. *“It’s 3:20 already. I’m running out of time.”*

She grabbed the phonebook and started calling every youth court until she had gotten the one that had a hearing for Harry Potter. She knew the address very well.

“But it’s on the opposite side of the city!” She started panicking. “What should I do now?”

“HAVE YOU GONE MAD?” Ron’s words rang in her ears. *“ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?”*

“OF COURSE I AM!” Hermione said with determination in her voice.

And then, after carefully picking up Dr Andersen, she disappeared with a *POP*.

sss

Meanwhile Harry was getting anxious. The hearing before him was about to finish and he had no idea what to say and how to get out of the situation.

"Where is Hermione? I can't believe she doesn't believe me. She's got to come."

CRACK!

The bushy-haired girl appeared in the doorway like she was about to step in.

"Smart move." Harry smiled in relief.

He was right. Every Muggle in the room thought that she simply walked in loudly.

Their heads turned back towards the judge.

Hermione walked down to the seat behind Harry's. When he turned back to look at her she mouthed "Hold on." and took his arm.

POP.

CHAPTER 4 – Only Six Weeks

The loud crack broke the silence in Dr Andersen's office.

“Oh Harry you are real!” Hermione hugged him. “You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“You Apparated!” Harry exclaimed. “Luckily you learnt to Apparate, last term!”

“LUCKILY! I almost went off my rocker practicing. How many times... Oh never mind.

Do you have a wand?”

Harry grinned. He took out the wands and enlarged them. “*Do I have a wand?*” He repeated.

“Where did you get them?”

“From Malfoy’s library, where else?”

“Malfoy’s? Never mind that now. We have to do something about *this*.” She carefully pulled out Dr Andersen from her pocket. She was still unconscious.

Hermione walked to the desk.

“She was writing an article about me! I can’t believe it.”

“... a brilliant student with no friends, imagined a brand new life full of excitement...”

“What rubbish!”

“How did you do that, anyway?” Harry gestured at Dr Andersen.

“Accidental Magic.”

“We can’t leave her like this.”

“I know that’s why I had to get you out. I hoped you’d have a wand.”

“THAT’S WHY YOU RESCUED ME? Glad to know I mean so much to you!”

“Of course not... I mean I didn’t rescue you for that. You know it. We must hurry. The Ministry must have detected the magic.”

“We can’t let them deal with her. I’ll explain it to you later. Let’s get out of here.”

sss

Mr. and Mrs. Granger were watching their favorite TV program, when it was interrupted by breaking news.

”A mentally disturbed teenage girl named Hermione Granger abducted her therapist Dr Susan Andersen earlier today. Then she helped her boyfriend known as Harry Potter, already a fugitive, to escape from his court hearing regarding breaking and entering. The couple should be considered armed and dangerous. If you see this couple do not approach them and call this special hot-line number...”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger stared at their daughters’ photo on the TV set in disbelief. Mr. Granger turned it off.

“So *that’s* Harry.” Mrs. Granger broke the silence.

“You know about him? Who is he?” Her husband demanded.

“She woke up from a nightmare shouting his name, about three weeks ago. I know nothing else.”

“Our daughter shouts some boy’s name in a dream and you don’t find it important enough to tell me?”

Their row was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

Mr. Granger went to answer it. When he came back he was followed by two people.

“Good evening madam. I am Detective-Inspector Greene, and this is Sergeant Johnson. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions about your daughter?”

“Please do.” Mrs. Granger looked shaken. The last thing she expected was for her child to have problems with the police.

“It must be some misunderstanding. *My* daughter would never do this.” Mr. Granger interrupted impatiently. “And she is certainly not mentally disturbed.”

Before anyone could say anything else, the phone rang.

“Put it on the speakerphone, would you?” Inspector Greene asked.

“Hello.”

“Hi mum, it’s me.”

“Hermione dear, are you all right? Where are you?” Mrs. Granger had tears in her voice.

Sergeant Johnson was dialing from her mobile phone asking for someone to trace the call.

“I’m all right. I just want you to know I’m fine, but I won’t be coming home anytime soon. But don’t worry, everything will be OK.”

“Not to worry! You father and I are worried sick. The police are here asking about you. And that terrible news on the telly.”

“What news?”

Inspector Greene was listening, looking at Sergeant Johnson to see whether the trace was complete.

“They say that you abducted a therapist, and helped that Harry bloke to escape. Why did you need a therapist?”

“Abducted! Nothing like that. She’s with us and she’s OK. Sort of. We’ll let her go as soon as it’s safe. But you’re in grave danger. You must leave the country at once. Go to Aunt Jane’s and wait until I call

you there. Don't hesitate a second. The police can't protect you from them."

"From who?"

"I can't explain it to you now, but they are extremely dangerous and ruthless. You've got to go at once!"

"Hermione, this is Detective-Inspector Greene speaking. Tell me where you are and we'll come to you. Just remain calm and I promise you everything will be OK."

Hermione hung up.

"We've got them." Sergeant Johnson announced triumphantly. "They are calling from a public phone at Manchester Road. It's just across the street."

They ran outside. It was already dark. They could see two figures running towards the river. The inspector and sergeant followed them around the bushes. But when they got there they could see nothing but a few people on the walkway. Inspector ran across the lawn and bended over the fence. All he could see was the dark water. The high tide was carrying a few branches upstream. Sergeant Johnson checked the tunnel's door. It was already locked.

"Bloody hell! Where are they?" Inspector Greene panted.

If he had looked up he might have spotted two silhouettes on a broomstick flying over Greenwich.

sss

"This way my Lord." Lucius never looked that nervous before.

"I know the way, thank you Lucius." Lord Voldemort snapped coldly. He headed towards Lucius' library without checking to see whether anyone followed him.

Wormtail gave Lucius and Narcissa a look that promised nothing good. All three of them followed Voldemort.

Voldemort was already in the library. He glanced at the mark on the wall and turned swiftly towards the safe.

"Alohamora!"

Lucius stood behind him, looking on in apprehension. After a few seconds, which seemed like an eternity to Lucius, Voldemort spun around.

"It's gone."

"But how...it's *impossible!*" Lucius stuttered.

"I trusted you Lucius. I trusted you."

"But... but, only *you*, my Lord and your wand can open this safe."

Voldemort's eyes had narrowed into slits.

"I heard you had gotten the twin wand. You bragged about it in front of your guests. Bellatrix had some interesting stories to tell about it."

"But no one could use *that* wand except you, my Lord."

"Indeed, since that old goat died, there is nobody who can challenge my power. However, someone entered your *impossible to break into* library."

"We searched everywhere. There is no trace of breaking in. I personally unlocked the door."

"Oh you did search, didn't you?"

Voldemort was examining the library. He stopped by the fireplace.

"We already checked it. The chimney is blocked and anyway it is too narrow for any human to slide down."

"And what about a snake?" Voldemort had a tiny piece of snakeskin on the tip of his finger.

"A snake?" Lucius was astonished. "What snake could do this?"

Wormtail stepped between them. "There is a myth that one of the headmistresses in Hogwarts was a snake Animagus. She was Dumbledore's teacher. Her name was Athena. Athena Malfoy."

"What does it have to do with it? She must have died a long time ago."

"Not necessarily. Animagus can live their animal years. You should know that, Lucius." Wormtail's squeaky voice was triumphant.

"That will do Wormtail." Voldemort turned to the wall.

"I know that you are there, you old witch." He hissed in anger. *"You can't hide from me forever. I'll get back what is mine, one way or another."*

sss

"Where are we going?" Hermione was shouting.

"To the Weasleys' hideout. Hold on!"

When they arrived two hours later they were soaking wet. Harry stood in front of what seemed like an abandoned crib on the slope of a hill. The rain was pouring in on them, but he didn't pay any attention.

"Harry, what are we waiting for?"

"We should have been in here that day. Someone should have taken care of it. That's what they told us before leaving. But only Death Eaters showed up. They took Rose from me and Ginny from Ron. I've never seen them again."

"Where is the hideout?" Hermione was shaking.

Harry looked at her. "I promised her everything would be all right. I told her that nothing would happen to her as long as I was there. She stopped crying and smiled at me. She smiled at me, Hermione, just before they broke in. And I failed her."

"But you were just a boy!" Hermione had to shout as the wind wuthered.

"I was her big brother!"

"We can't stay here like this, Harry!" Their faces were lightened up by the faint glow from Harry's wand. "Someone will see the light!"

Harry laid his hand on a rod sticking from the ground.

"Harry Potter. Corvidae."

The small hole opened in front of their feet. Harry crawled in.

"Come in."

Hermione followed.

The interior was one room twenty feet long and twelve feet wide. They could barely stand upright. There were four small chairs around the kitchen table besides the fireplace and six bedrolls on the other side of the room. An old wardrobe and large chest were the only pieces of furniture. The opening besides Hermione closed.

"Just like I remember it six years ago." Harry lit the lantern above the table.

He opened the wardrobe.

"There must be some dry clothes in here. I'll make some food. You can try one of these wands tomorrow."

"Harry, we are on our own now aren't we? What are we going to do?"

"I'll have to find Sirius. He'll help me to find Rose. I've got to find her. Nothing else matters to me, now." Harry looked down. "I didn't mean to get you into all this. I'm sorry."

"Sorry! If you didn't call I'd have gone *crazy*. We'll make it Harry. We'll save Ron and Ginny, too. But first you must tell me everything."

It was dawn before they finally went to their bedrolls and had some sleep. For the first time in the last four weeks Hermione felt content.

sss

"It's not possible! No child resisted that spell, letting alone escaping from Malfoy's manor." Mad-Eye Moody nervously walked back and forth. "It *must* be a trap."

"And what if it isn't? I failed those children once. I won't let Harry down again. I'm his godfather." Sirius Black was sitting at the table. There was no doubt in his voice.

"But you are our leader as well. You can't take unnecessary risks." Remus Lupin tried to calm them down. "There must be something we can do to check whether it's true first."

"As a matter of fact there is. If Harry is free the only place he can go to is the Weasleys' hideout. I'll send the owl. Only those that are designated to enter and know the password can go in without setting the trap off."

"I can go and take him. No one suspects that I'm one of you. Furthermore, Harry will trust me. I'm his cousin Tonks."

"That sounds reasonable." Remus agreed.

"I still don't like it." Moody grumbled. "And you two lovebirds, stop looking each other like that in front of older people like me. "

Remus and Tonks tried to hold in their snickers. Even Sirius grinned.

sss

The hideout was a total mess as Hermione was trying one wand after another.

"This is hopeless."

"Have you tried this one?" Harry held an old-fashioned wand with carvings on it.

Hermione took it and instantly flew backwards and smashed into the wall. The searing light sparked from the tip of the wand and disappeared in the fireplace.

"You must control the wand, not the other way 'round!"

"Easier said than done!" Hermione struggled to keep the wand in her hand. She could feel energy she never experienced before.

"Block this! *Expeleamus!*"

Hermione blocked it with ease. The other jinxes Harry sent she blocked routinely as well.

"Harry, I never did it like this, before. What's happening?"

"I don't know. It must be the wand needed something to focus on. Or you did. Anyways, you found your wand."

Dr Andersen looked at them in terror.

Hermione turned to her.

"*Instaurare!*"

A few seconds later Dr Andersen was restored to her normal size.

"Doctor, let me introduce you to Harry Potter. Harry this is Dr Susan Andersen."

"I-I hea-rd a lot about you Harry-Harry." Dr Andersen pulled her hand back before Harry could shake it. All her self-confidence disappeared.

"I am sorry you've been through all of this, doctor. We'll let you go, as soon it's safe for you. We must go now, but we'll be back soon. You'll have to wait for us here. There is no way you can get out without us."

One they got outside, Harry and Hermione noticed that the rain had stopped and it was a beautiful morning.

"Where are we going?"

“To the Burrow. It’s on the other side of the hill.”

The Burrow stood at the same spot as before, and that fact was the only resemblance of the place Harry loved so much. Instantly he understood that another family lived there and they were most probably Death Eaters or some of their faithful servants. They could see a newspaper in front of the doorstep.

“*Accio newspaper!*” The morning issue of the *Daily Prophet* flew into Hermione’s hand. The title on the front page was:

THE NOTORIOUS SIRIUS BLACK AND HIS GANG STRIKE AGAIN

Sirius Black and his gang are getting more and more dangerous every day. The infamous gang tried to break into Hogwarts from their hiding place in the Forbidden Forest. The attack was foiled by the Ministry of Magic and members of the Hogwarts staff.

The Department for Protection of Muggles reported that Sirius Black’s followers continue with the abduction of Muggles and especially Muggle children and are using them as sacrifices in dark rituals.

The Minister of Magic, Peter Pettigrew promises, “that it’s only a matter of time before Black and others are caught and brought to justice.” Continued on page 4

“Department for Protection of *Muggles!*” Hermione exclaimed in disbelief.

“Keep your voice down.” Harry cautioned her.

“They called me Mudblood, the *pigs*. I bet they don’t call Muggleborns to Hogwarts anymore just to ‘protect’ them!”

“At least if they pretend they care about Muggles they’ll leave Dr Andersen alone. We can erase her recent memories and leave her in the nearest town.”

sss

“Draco, something very precious to me, has been taken.” Voldemort said in his chilling voice, “I want you to help me to get it back.”

Draco gulped nervously. “Of course My Lord, I’ll do my best.”

“I don’t want you to do your best! I want it back! Now I want you to promise me that you will hand it over to me in six weeks.”

Narcissa’s eyes widened in dread. “No My Lord, he’s too young for such an important mission. I’ll do it myself.”

“But of course Narcissa that I count on it that you and your *dear* husband will help your son in his quest.” He turned to Draco. “Will you promise me, Draco?”

“Yes, My Lord, I do promise.”

“Well, well, Draco, the grown up wizards, and you are one of them now, make the Unbreakable Vow, didn’t your father tell you?”

“No!” Narcissa cried, but Lucius put his hand over her mouth. “Don’t make it worse.” He whispered in her ear.

“We’ll need your wand, Wormtail.” Voldemort reminded him.

Wormtail took out his wand, while Voldemort and Draco kneeled holding each other’s right hands.

“Will you, Draco Malfoy bring me my diary which was taken from this library in six weeks?”

“I will!” said Draco.

Bright flames shaped like snakes burst from the tip of Wormtail’s wand, and coiled around their hands like ropes.

Draco stood up. “I won’t fail you My Lord!” he said with false confidence, while the words “*Only six weeks.*” ran through his head.

A/N:

There are a few chapters that must be re-written before publishing.
Reviews are wellcome and can make the story better.

Chapter Five – High Noon

When Hermione and Harry returned to the hideout an owl was waiting for them with an envelope. Harry recognized the handwriting at once. He could hear his heartbeat drumming in his ears while unrolling the parchment. He started reading out loud.

Dear Harry,

I heard the news about your miraculous escape. My position doesn't allow me to come to you personally, but someone I fully trust will meet you tomorrow at noon, at the place I gave you your first Quidditch lesson despite your parents' prohibition.

Don't reply to this letter, because all incoming messages are being intercepted by the Ministry. We cannot use the fireplace for the very same reason. The person you'll meet will have the plan to get you here.

Love you,

Your godfather

Sirius

Harry was shaking with excitement. His first Quidditch lesson with Sirius flashed before his eyes and brought a grin to his face.

"Hermione, we don't have to look for Sirius! He's already found us."

"But he doesn't know about me, does he?" It was a statement, not a question. "What are we going to tell him? How are you going to explain to him about your escape and your knowledge of magic?"

Harry had never thought about it.

"I have no idea. We have all day to think of something. But first, let's take care of Dr Andersen."

Dr Andersen looked at them in horror. "What are you going to do to me?" she whispered, backing away from them until she hit the wooden wall.

"Don't worry. We won't hurt you. We are taking you back home."

"I don't want to fly on that thing," she pointed at the Firebolt.

"Even better. We'll leave you in the nearest non-magic village. You can go home on your own from there." Harry didn't look too concerned. He had other things to worry about.

"Harry! Don't be so insensitive."

"Oh no, without Ron around, she's got to fight with me instead."

"No Hermione, I'll be just fine. You two have better things to do than to worry about me." Dr Andersen obviously wanted to end her "adventure" as soon as possible.

"OK, then. Hold tight." Hermione took her by the hand.

POP!

A few moments later, she appeared with a crack.

"It's done. I've erased her memory. What are we going to do now?"

"Let's see what we can find in here."

sss

Mr. and Mrs. Granger were watching the news on TV hoping they'd hear something about their daughter.

"Dr Susan Andersen who was allegedly abducted by one of her patients was found in Wiltshire a few hours ago. According to the police report, she is suffering from amnesia. It is unclear whether she was kidnapped or simply lost. Detective-inspector Greene, who was in charge of the case, refused to comment."

There has been an increase of terrorist attacks in..."

"I KNEW IT! I KNEW HERMIONE WOULDN'T DO SUCH A THING!" Mr. Granger shouted in joy.

"Of course she wouldn't." Mrs. Granger agreed. "There must be some other explanation. What if Hermione was right, though? Maybe we *should* go to my sister's and wait for her to call?"

"Nonsense. We have our patients. Besides, who'd be after us anyways?"

sss

The previous evening...

The Malfoys had never eaten their dinner in such silence before. Once it was finished, Lucius started making his way upstairs, when Narcissa finally exploded.

"Where do you think you are going? It is all your fault! You, and your *endless* ambition! Why did you have to offer to keep Voldemort's book safe, eh?"

"How *dare* you say our master's name?" Lucius hissed. "You, who were *nothing* until I married you!"

"Nothing! Ha!" she screamed. "My bloodline is way purer than yours! And He is NOT *my* master! I'll say his name whenever I want to! Voldemort, *Voldemort*, VOLDEMORT!"

Her voice grew louder with every word.

"And now my only son..." she started to cry.

"*Our* son will be all right. Many people owe me big favors, and you can stop sniveling and owl your sister. I *will* find Black; he is the one behind this. And when I find him, I will get the diary, and Draco can give it to the Dark Lord.

And now if you will excuse me, I have letters to write. Come with me Draco." he said, making his way towards the library.

SSS

That evening, Harry was feeling dizzy because Hermione had forced him to practice Apparating all afternoon and evening. At least he could Apparate relatively well, now.

It was after supper when he shouted "Hermione, look what I've found!" while rummaging through a chest. "Gryffindor robes! This one will fit you." Then he looked at the bottom. "Hang on." He took an old parchment and tapped it with his wand.

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good!"

Writing appeared on the Map.

Mr. Moony would like to remind the user off the Marauder's map that one must be on Hogwarts grounds for the Map to work.

Mr. Padfoot would like to ask why said user isn't at Hogwarts at this time of year.

Mr. Wormtail suggests that he/she might have been expelled.

Mr. Prongs says that if the user was expelled then he must have been an even bigger prankster than the Marauders, which is impossible, therefore couldn't possibly be -for lack of a better word- kicked out of school.

Beneath the map in another small compartment he found a shiny, silvery cloth. He knew what it was.

Hermione didn't seem interested in his discovery. She finally said

"Harry, I've been thinking..."

Something in her voice and look attracted his attention.

"Yes?"

"Harry, we're going to war tomorrow, aren't we?" She paused. "That's what it is, isn't it? A war! And people die in war, aren't they?"

“Are you afraid?”

“Of course I am. But there’s something else. You see, Dr Andersen isn’t here anymore and I’ve never...” She stopped avoiding Harry’s eyes.

“Neither have I.”

sss

The next morning, Harry and Hermione were getting ready for the meeting. They just needed a cover story. But the only thing they agreed upon was that they couldn’t tell the truth.

The closer it got to noon, the more nervous Hermione and Harry became. At half past eleven, they pulled on the Invisibility Cloak and went to the meadow on the other side of the forest where Harry had first ridden a broomstick.

Someone was already there. As they came closer they could recognize who it was.

“Look Hermione, it’s Tonks! My cousin. Well, she’s not my real cousin, but she’s *like* a cousin, you know?”

“I’ve met her Harry, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Harry impatiently. “Just pretend you didn’t.”

“Who do you take me for?” she snapped.

Tonks spun around and looked in their direction, like she had heard something.

“Cousin Tonks!” Harry cheered pulling the cloak off.

“Harry! You’ve grown up so much!” She hugged him tight as they met halfway across the field. She was smiling widely, but there was deep sadness in her eyes. Then she spotted Hermione.

“I thought you’d be alone?” The smile disappeared from her face.

“Er, this is Hermione Granger. Hermione, my cousin Tonks.”

“I’m pleased to meet you Tonks.” Hermione extended her hand, but Tonks was still looking at her suspiciously.

“They’re expecting me to take you back by yourself.” Tonks said. “We can’t afford to let strangers into our Headquarters.”

“Hermione is not a stranger! If she can’t go I won’t go either!” Harry said passionately.

“Without her I’d be lost in London. I’d never have made it here.”

“Who is she?” Tonks asked in a firm voice.

“I’m a witch. I graduated from Salem School for Witches. I came to London to visit my parents and saw Harry being detained by the Muggle police. I recognized he was a wizard at once. And because nobody came to his rescue I figured out he wasn’t on the Death Eater’s side. So I decided to help him.”

Tonks looked surprised. “What do you know about Death Eaters?”

“Bill and Charlie Weasley told us all about them. I attended some of their meetings. There are people that want to know the real truth, you know.”

“Tonks, you should leave it up to Sirius to decide. She can’t go back. They already know about her. They were after me when she came. And the Muggle police are after her, as well. I can’t let her down after all she’s done for me. Either we both go, or we stay here.” Harry was determined.

Tonks knew that she couldn’t go back without Harry. Besides the fact that he was Sirius’ godson, he was also the first child that broke the curse. They had to know how.

“Very well. We’ll meet Sirius in the Forbidden Forest instead of Headquarters. He’ll decide what to do with Hermione. We’ll have to hurry to catch the Hogwarts Express. Otherwise we’ll have to wait till next week.”

“How will we get to Kings Cross in time?” Hermione asked.

“We’ll take the bus.”

sss

“You shouldn’t be drinking this much.” Remus said. He was standing in the large room with a long table, a map across one wall and bookshelves on the other. He didn’t look pleased with Sirius and Hagrid, who were sitting at the table with a nearly empty bottle of Firewhisky.

“I’m too nervous to stop now.” Sirius retorted, his words slurred as he poured himself and Hagrid another round. “We need another bottle, Hagrid.”

“Yes, sir, right away sir. Another one’s comin’.” Hagrid reached into his backpack.

“This is ridiculous. Where do you find that stuff? It’s silly to risk being caught for a few bottles of Firewhisky.”

“You’re *absolutely* right Moony!” Sirius turned to Hagrid. “Hagrid, next time bring a *lot* more. It’s not *worth* risking for this *little*.”

“You’re both hopeless!”

Moody and Professor McGonagall rushed into the room.

“Tonks really needs to change her Patronus. That silvery wolf surprises me each time.” McGonagall said.

“You mean you’re scared of dear old Moony here. It was a brilliant idea turning into a wolf, when you are due to become a *werewolf*. Ha, ha.”

“It’s not funny Sirius.” Remus looked hurt. “Minerva, a sobering potion, please.”

“Ah, no, no, no.” Sirius whined. “Moony you’re so *mean*.”

“Oh well, let’s do it the Muggle way.” Moody said. “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” A bucket was lifted into the air, levitated for a moment above Sirius’ head, and then Moody flicked his wrist and the bucket turned upside down pouring cold water onto Sirius.

“Tonks sent us a message. She’s found Harry. They are meeting us tonight in the Forbidden Forest. They are coming on the Hogwarts Express.”

“Why doesn’t she bring him here?”

“Because Harry’s girlfriend is coming with them!” Moody was fuming.

“Wait a second Mad-Eye. Tonks didn’t say that Hermione girl was his girlfriend. She helped him get out of trouble.” McGonagall tried to calm him down.

“Who are you talking about?” Remus asked impatiently.

“In her message, Tonks said that she graduated from Salem School for Witches. Harry didn’t want to go without her.”

“Well, well.” Sirius looked delighted. “If he is any bit like his father, she’s his girlfriend by now. It was about time for him to discover the true secrets of life!”

“Sirius, you don’t really think...” McGonagall was scandalized.

“If she’s really from S.S.W... they did it.” Sirius liked the idea. “My little godson’s all grown up.”

“Sirius, stop it, will you.” Remus snapped. “You can’t go like this to the Forbidden Forest. Drink this! Now!”

“A drink? Now you’re talking my language.” Sirius bottomed the glass. It took a few seconds for the potion to work.

“You know Moony, it was really wicked of you, giving me the potion in a whisky glass! But it’s a splendid idea.” He turned to Hagrid. “Hagrid, let’s have another drink.”

He gave Hagrid another glass filled with the potion.

“Thank you sir. Yeh know what Hagrid needs. And what they’re all fussin’ about, eh?”

A few seconds later, Hagrid looked at them in bewilderment.

“Get ready. You and Remus will go with me to meet Harry and his... lady friend.”

Moody stepped forward. “Sirius, it *must* be a trap. We know nothing about that girl. You can’t go like this. CONSTANT VILIGANCE!”

“Of course I can. Remus and Hagrid will take care of me. No one knows the Forbidden Forest like Hagrid. You worry too much. You’ll be in charge while I’m away.”

sss

Hermione went out of the Knight Bus looking very green in the face. Harry and Tonks followed. At the last step, Tonks tripped and nearly fell.

“Still clumsy, eh *Nymphadora*?”

“You two better find a cover and put the cloak on.” She ignored Harry’s remark.

They went through the barrier between platforms nine and ten. The Hogwarts Express was already there, but the platform wasn’t full of people like at the beginning of the year. Still some parents decided to send their children to Hogwarts after the Ministry assured them that it was perfectly safe.

It wasn’t difficult to find an empty compartment. Harry and Hermione remained under the cloak. They didn’t feel like talking. The trip to Hogwarts was always exciting and happy. The sight of the mostly empty train, made them feel even sadder.

It was already dusk when they arrived. While they were waiting for everybody to leave the train, they could see that instead of Hagrid,

Filch was waiting for students. He had a crop in his hand, and he looked like he couldn't wait to use it.

They took the path on the south side of the lake, towards Hagrid's cabin.

"You can take the cloak off," Tonks whispered when they couldn't see the castle anymore.

The Forbidden Forest looked just as spooky as it did in Harry's other life. Tonks led the way deeper into the forest.

After an hour and a half of brisk walking they arrived at the small clearing. Tonks took her wand and flashed the Resistance code in a very low light.

Soon after, Harry spotted three very familiar figures walking towards them.

"Sirius!"

Chapter Six – *Avada Kedavra!*

“Harry, is that really you?” Sirius exclaimed, holding Harry by his shoulders.

“Yeah, Padfoot, it’s me.” To Harry, it felt like Sirius was back from the dead. They hugged.

Hermione stood awkwardly a few feet away, looking like she didn’t know what to do.

“Welcome Harry, welcome.” Remus ruffled Harry’s hair. Then he turned to Tonks who was standing in the shadows. If he had seen her face, he would have seen tears glistening in her eyes.

“Remus, I’m so sorry.” She whispered sadly. “*Petrificus Totalus!*”

Remus became as stiff as a board. He couldn’t move, but his eyes widened in shock and accusation.

“What...” And before Sirius could say anything else, jinxes shot at them from all directions. Harry, Hermione and Sirius ducked, but Hagrid stood his ground trying to fight back. Several jinxes and hexes hit him in the chest and he flew backwards letting out a painful yell.

“SURRENDER! YOU ARE SURROUNDED! RESISTANCE IS FUTILE!”

“NEVER!” The trio shouted in unison. They shot jinxes back, trying to take cover. The situation looked desperate. There were at least two-dozen Death Eaters against the three of them.

Hermione noticed a giant tree in the middle of the clearing. Instead of fighting the Death Eaters she set it on fire. She could see some of them pulling back and others trying to go around.

Suddenly, a bright green light flashed from behind the Death Eaters and Harry could see one of them falling to the ground, obviously dead. The next instant, spells started flying all over the forest.

“Mad-Eye!” Sirius hissed through clenched teeth, and Harry couldn’t tell whether it was from anger or relief. Harry used the confusion and ran back to see what happened to Hagrid.

He found him lying in the bushes. Hagrid’s face was frozen in a painful grimace. The robes on his chest were completely burnt and half of his beard as well. His eyes were wide open and his wand firmly in his hand pointing towards Death Eaters like he was still fighting. Harry immediately knew that Hagrid was dead.

He fell on his knees next to Hagrid’s body.

“Hagrid, Hagrid! Oh no, *not* Hagrid!”

From the corner of his eye, he saw a figure raising a wand. Harry recognized him as Antonin Dolohov. He rolled over just in time to avoid the blast that hit the giant tree behind Harry. It started to fall with a loud cracking sound.

“*Sectumsempra!*” Dolohov couldn’t block the spell. His face and chest were ripped by the curse and he fell on his back jerking with pain and bleeding.

Harry turned around trying to find Sirius and Hermione. His view was blocked by the fallen tree. He tried to make his way back through the broken branches. On his left the fire spread engulfing bushes into flames. Harry could smell the smoke and feel the mounting heat.

Obviously magically shielded from the blaze, four Death Eaters appeared from the wall of fire and were now heading towards Harry. He could see their cloaks streaming against the flames as they walked. Their dark figures were growing bigger as they were approaching casting long dancing shadows before them. The explosions of fire and flaming sparks dazzled the night sky above the Forbidden Forest.

“*I have to hide! They’ll see me.*” Harry thought. He knew he wouldn’t stand a chance against four grown up wizards. But the branches of the fallen tree were getting thicker and stronger as he was pulling back and he couldn’t make it through. Desperately trying to run he fell and got tangled in the ivy and blackthorn. He couldn’t use his wand

and he couldn't pull the cloak or Firebolt. The commotion attracted the Death Eaters' attention and they turned towards his position. The more he struggled the more entangled he became. Then panic seized him. He had to think of something fast.

"If you want to be a serpent you wish to become a serpent." Athena's words rang in his head. *"Of course!"*

The Death Eaters couldn't find the boy they could see seconds ago.

"Where is he?" Harry could hear their voices.

"Keep looking! He can't have just disappeared from the face of the earth!" One of them shouted blasting his way through the brushwood.

"Maybe he Apparated."

"We'd hear the sound!" The Death Eater snapped exasperatedly. "And who'd be able to apparate in such conditions? Honestly Crabbe!"

Harry didn't hear the rest of the argument, because he slid through the branches looking for Sirius and Hermione. He could hear the sound of the battle fading away.

It was then that he saw Sirius lying on the ground withering in pain.

sss

After Hagrid fell, Sirius engaged in the battle trying to keep the Death Eaters at the distance. He saw Harry's 'girlfriend' setting a giant tree in front of her to fire. He shouted at Hermione "Take cover! I'll take care of them!" It was a bit of an overstatement – he couldn't possibly take care of so many Death Eaters single-handedly.

When Moody and others attacked, Sirius looked around in order to get them all to a safer position. Remus was still petrified and helpless and Harry was out of sight.

Sirius could hear Harry say in a broken voice: *"Not Hagrid!"*

"We have to pull back!" He yelled.

Hermione gasped in shock. "But what about Professor Lupin?" She shouted.

Sirius didn't have time to comprehend the fact that she called Remus 'Professor'. He turned back when they heard the blast and cracking sound of the falling tree. Both dived in the opposite directions. Sirius could see Remus lying beneath the branches. He tried to pull him out when unbearable pain knocked him onto the ground.

"*Crucio!*" Bellatrix Lestrangle was standing behind him laughing while he screamed.

"Good evening dear cousin. How are you today?" She cackled sarcastically. "You seem to be in a lot of pain."

"Go to Hell, you bitch." Sirius spat at her.

"*Crucio!*" She stepped closer. "You never learnt your manners. It was always you that spoiled *everything!* You filthy Gryffindor! You just couldn't be sorted to Slytherin like the rest of family. *Crucio!*" She paused every time after casting the curse obviously enjoying watching him withering in pain.

"Oh no, you preferred your mudblood friends. *Crucio!*" She was hysteric. "Where are they now?" Her eyes were burning in utter hatred. "I still remember your first year. I was looking forward greeting you in Hogwarts. But no, not you. You had better plans. Better friends. You didn't even come home for Christmas! Blood traitor! *CRUCIO!*"

sss

Harry raised his eyes and saw Bellatrix standing above Sirius, pointing her wand at him as he was twitching in pain. As quickly as he could he transformed himself back into the human. Fortunately she didn't hurry to finish Sirius off. Harry could hear her hideous laughter, as she was taking her time like they were not in the middle of the battle.

As Harry was transforming blinding hate filled him. He remembered every bad thing she did. He remembered Neville's parents and her triumphant scream as Sirius fell through the Veil and died. While the memories were speeding through his head he wished to destroy her. To make she didn't exist, to wipe her from the face of the earth. He had never felt like that. But most of all Harry remembered her words:

"Never used an Unforgivable curse before have you boy? You have to mean it Potter! You need to really want to cause pain!"

"NO! Not this time!" He shouted pointing his wand. In a split second she turned; but it was too late.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" In an instant Harry felt like something was sucking his soul out. Every cell of his body trembled while the surge of energy rushed towards his right hand. He could feel no air in his lungs and a splitting pain going from his skull, over his chest to every bone of his body. Everything froze for a very brief moment and then the blinding green light left the tip of his wand and hit Bellatrix straight in the chest.

Harry *did* mean it.

Her lifeless body fell to the ground. Lord Voldemort's most faithful follower was dead.

Totally exhausted, Harry stepped forward and fell to his knees staring at her. The pain was gone with the flash, but he felt emptiness spreading from his chest and unnatural coldness in his blood. Bellatrix didn't look evil anymore, but almost innocent and so peaceful, so serene. Surprised, he realized how small and fragile she seemed. And then, the pain was back again. His forehead was burning like never before.

"The scar!" He cried *"My scar is back!"* He didn't dare to touch it.

Sirius looked at Harry in disbelief. "You killed Bellatrix!" He exclaimed.

"Bellatrix is dead! The boy killed her!" One of the Death Eaters yelled, pointing at them.

Like awoken from a dream, Harry jumped and looked around. "Where's Hermione?"

"It doesn't matter now! We've got to get out of here before they arrive! *Finite Incartium!*" He lifted the spell from Remus. He stood up still looking shocked at Tonks' betrayal.

"I can't believe it...all this time, she was working for *them*." He said, yanking his head towards the Death Eaters, who were cautiously getting closer. Bellatrix' death apparently shook them. It gave Sirius, Remus and Harry some time to regroup as Moody and others were joining them.

"I won't leave her! HERMIONE!" Harry bellowed, frantically looking around.

"Over here!" He heard her voice from the other side of the fallen tree. Behind him, Sirius and Remus were firing curses towards the Death Eaters.

Before he could do anything else, he heard someone say "*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" and Hermione's scream of terror as a flash of green light illuminated the forest. He could hear the sound of a body hitting the ground.

"No, Hermione! NO!"

"There's nothing you can do for her anymore. She's gone." Sirius grabbed him tightly. "We've got to go before it's too late." Harry struggled, but Sirius wouldn't let go.

"*Portus!*" Remus made the portkey. Moody and a few others were already around him. Harry recognized Kingsley Shacklebolt, Angelina Johnson, and Cedric Diggory.

"Quickly, take the portkey!" Sirius told him.

Harry took the portkey. Moody started counting "One... "

"*Something is wrong.*"

“Two...”

“She screamed! Bella didn’t let a sound out of her mouth!”

“Three...” but just before Moody said the last number, Harry released the portkey. The next moment they disappeared leaving only Harry behind.

SSS

“Bring the injured in here!” Madam Pomfrey commanded. “I’ll take care of heavy wounds first, the others will have to wait!”

“Where is Harry? Where are Hagrid and Tonks?” McGonagall asked Remus and Sirius.

“Harry? But he should be here! HARRY!” Sirius was panicky.

“He must have stayed, to find that girl.” Remus added resigned. He looked completely shattered.

“Perhaps he’ll come with the other group.” Moody was nervous, waiting for the rest of his squad to arrive.

“What happened there? Will someone tell me?” McGonagall asked again.

Moody stepped in. “It was a trap like I said. Only it was Tonks that betrayed us.”

“No! Surely not Tonks!” McGonagall looked at them in disbelief like expecting that someone would deny Moody’s words.

“Believe it or not! Hagrid paid with his life because of it!” Moody was furious.

Every word was like a dagger, being stabbed into Remus’ heart, over and over again.

“Mad-Eye, you disobeyed my orders. I told you to stay here until I come back.” Sirius turned to the old auror.

“As a matter of fact you left me in charge. And as the commanding officer I took initiative and led us to counter ambush. If we trained those kids like I said we should have, there would be far more Death Eaters that tasted death.” Moody responded stubbornly.

“Who did you kill?”

“Parkinson.”

“Splendid. Now his kids will be our sworn enemies to the rest of their lives. Are you going to kill them too? We can’t kill them all, Med-Eye. Don’t you understand?” It was apparent that this wasn’t the first time they had this argument.

“You sound like Albus. If we had killed more of Death Eaters when we had a chance, we wouldn’t be in this position, and many good people would still be alive, including him! But no, we had to put them all in Azkaban. And of course when Dementors rebelled, we had them back in action.” Moody raised his voice.

“Dumbledore was a great wizard and a noble man!”

“And now he is a *dead* wizard and our children and grandchildren are enslaved and all we have is this filthy hole you call Headquarters! How noble is that?”

“The Death Eaters never came in such a number and fought so fiercely like tonight. They were after something. The Ministry wouldn’t send so many of them to one place. All of Voldemort’s best followers were there. Bellatrix, Karkaroff, Rookwood, Dolohov, Crouch... they were all there. Why?” Sirius said more to himself.

Moody continued: “That boy couldn’t be Harry. He must be an imposter. No boy of that age can cast the Killing Curse. I’ve never seen such a *powerful* Killing Curse before. And he was a slave too.”

“A killing curse?” McGonagall repeated faintly. “Who...”

“Bellatrix. My cousin. He saved my life.”

“He’s an Animagus, too.” Remus added.

“What kind of Animagus?” Sirius gasped in surprise.

“That’s the most intriguing of all. A snake Animagus.”

“But there was only one snake Animagus recorded in history! It was Athena Malfoy, one of the headmistresses of Hogwarts.” McGonagall exclaimed.

“Animagus or not, he knows how to fight. I wish I had more like him here. But it couldn’t be Harry!” Moody couldn’t calm down. “Finally they’ve arrived.” He turned to the rest of his squad.

Sirius looked but immediately realized that Harry wasn’t among them.

“You can say what ever you like, but I know it was Harry. I’ll find him, even if it’s the last thing I do. And I’ll find Karkaroff. He’ll pay for killing that girl. You’ll remain in charge, I’m going back!” Sirius stepped towards the exit.

Moody stood on his way followed by Remus.

“Don’t be foolish. There’s no point going there now. Even in your wild shape it’d take you one hour to get there.” Moody said.

“They don’t know that he is an Animagus and telling by his actions he’ll turn into a snake and sneak to them unnoticed. But they know Padfoot very well. They’ll kill you on the spot if they see you.” Remus added.

For a three or four seconds Sirius struggled with his own feelings. Only twenty minutes ago he had Harry in his arms. The hug brought him memories of the happy life he’d once had. And now it’s all lost. It was his fault. He should have known that Harry wouldn’t leave her, the same way James didn’t leave Lilly.

“Don’t worry. It’s not all lost. We’ll find him tomorrow. He’ll be hiding somewhere in the forest. You’ll find him by your scent. Get some rest now.” Remus put his hand on Sirius’ shoulder. He knew what his friend was thinking.

“Yes Remus, we’ll find him.” Sirius sighed. “I’m sorry about Tonks. I really am mate.” he added.

Remus nodded.

Chapter Seven – The Traitor’s Story

Thanks to his snake vision, Harry could clearly see everything around him. Karkaroff and Crouch were standing over Hermione’s body.

“Who is she?” Crouch asked. “She wears Gryffindor robes. But she’s not from Hogwarts.”

“I don’t know. Somehow she deflected my curse and it hit Goyle. She must be stunned. Let’s take her to the Hogwarts dungeons and let Snape interrogate her.” Karkaroff answered.

“*HERMIONE’S ALIVE!*” Harry hissed out loud. Fortunately nobody could understand it. They thought it was just a Forbidden Forest creature.

“How do you mean deflected? Who can deflect the Killing Curse? Are you sure you were not aiming at Goyle by mistake? It’s not that it’s a great loss...” Crouch finished with obvious despise.

“What do you take me for? Besides, in that case I’d be one who’s stunned not her.” The voices faded as they walked away.

Harry could see Tonks discreetly pick up something from the ground before she joined the others.

“I can’t do anything now, but I’ll make a plan tomorrow.” He said to himself. Harry felt exhausted. He found a hole beneath the old tree and drifted off into sleep.

sss

Hermione woke up. She tried to move but only rattled the chains she was in. Hermione tried not to panic. She looked around.

The room was lit by two torches that were on the opposite sides. The stone walls were partially covered with mold. The chains and manacles were hanging all over the place.

Hermione had a very bad feeling about this place, though it looked somewhat familiar.

"What happened? How did I get here?"

Then she remembered.

She was standing there, looking at Harry, Sirius and Lupin, not knowing what to do with herself. Hermione was surprised at how excited she felt when she saw Sirius. He looked quite different than the last time she saw him. So dominant, so confident.

"And really handsome too."

"Oh, shut up." She told herself.

The next thing she knew, Tonks petrified Lupin, and the forest was lit by jinxes. Hermione ducked, and could hear Hagrid's scream. She heard the voice that shouted at them:

"SURRENDER! YOU ARE SURROUNDED! RESISTANCE IS FUTILE!"

"NEVER!" She yelled. Her heart was pounding. She had to do something quickly! Hermione saw a tree on her left with widespread branches. Instantly she turned and set it to fire. It gave her a few seconds to take cover. Sirius said something, but she couldn't understand. At the same time she heard Harry calling Hagrid's name.

"But what about Professor Lupin?" She shouted.

The next moment, she took a dive to avoid a falling tree. As she turned around she could see she was separated from others. She tried to apparate back, but she couldn't, most likely Death Eaters warded the area in advance. Hermione looked around to see which end of the tree was closer, so she could go around it and join Sirius and others. She made her way through the bushes when she realized she was surrounded by three Death Eaters. Hermione was cut off from the others with nowhere to run. She tried to stay calm and decided not to surrender no matter what happens.

"Stupefy!" she stunned one of the Death Eaters.

She heard Harry yell "HERMIONE!" "OVER HERE!"

The Death Eater to her left raised his wand.

“AVA...!”

On the first syllable of the curse everything around Hermione slowed down like in slow-motion movie while she turned towards Karkaroff, pointing her wand at him. In a flashback she remembered her mother’s voice over the phone when she and Harry called. She remembered how much she loved her parents at that moment, but she couldn’t leave Harry. Three most important persons of her life - her parents and Harry were there and she could feel again the same overwhelming emotion she felt that evening, when she knew she might never see her parents again.

“...DA KED...”

Hermione put all her energy into her spell. She knew that no shield could hold against the Killing Curse. In a flash she changed the spell and instead of shield she visualized the beam of light that was attacking the tip of Karkaroff’s wand, thus turning the shield into a weapon. She exhaled the last molecule of air from her lungs as she screamed “PROTEGO!” in the same time as Karkaroff finished his spell. The green light from his wand almost struck her, but slightly deflected from the beam that left her wand and hit someone on her right. She heard the sound of the body hitting the forest floor. Hermione felt weak, her knees couldn’t hold and she collapsed to the ground.

sss

Tonks didn’t visit the Malfoys very often. Even though she was Narcissa’s niece, the fact that she was a half-blood made her not a very welcome guest.

However, this time she didn’t wait to be invited. She came in the early morning and was waiting for Narcissa in the hall. When she arrived, Tonks noticed that Narcissa was dressed in black.

“Nymphadora, to what do I owe this pleasure? Let’s go into the parlor, shall we?”

“Thank you, Aunt Narcissa.”

They waited in silence until the servants left the room.

“So, you were there when Bellatrix was murdered.” Narcissa said casually, sipping her tea. She might as well have been discussing the weather.

Tonks wasn’t fooled by her tone. She knew very well how close the two sisters were.

“I’m so sorry,” she said “I know how much she meant to you.”

“Tell me, now. How did it happen? *Who killed my sister?*”

“I brought Harry Potter and his girlfriend, to the Forbidden Forest as planned. I disabled the werewolf like it was ordered. The others, instead of taking care of Sirius, killed that stupid fool Hagrid. Nobody expected those kids to fight back. The little Mudblood bitch set the tree on fire and distracted us.”

Narcissa was listening as her eyes narrowed.

“Suddenly, we were attacked from the back. Parkinson fell down dead. The so-called Resistance had launched an ambush. In the meantime Dolohov missed little Potter and his spell hit the tree that fell down between us and Black. Only Aunt Bellatrix managed to surprise Black with her specialty Crucio. She wanted him alive. Nobody knows how that boy appeared there. He sent the Killing Curse towards her before she could do anything.”

“Are you saying that a boy, a *slave* boy killed such a great witch?” Narcissa finally raised her voice.

“Nobody has ever seen such a powerful Killing Curse before!” Tonks avoided the eye contact with her aunt. “It can match even the Dark Lord’s! It must have been an imposter. Someone used us to get to the Resistance and it wasn’t anyone from our side!”

“And what is *your* side, Nymphadora?” Narcissa was intentionally mocking.

"I always served the Dark Lord." Tonks said quietly. "I would never betray him." She drank a bit of her tea. "Anyhow, I did my part right. It was the others that messed up." She took a deep breath. "I came here to talk about my parents."

"Yes, what about them?" Narcissa raised an eyebrow.

Tonks took a deep breath before she continued. "Could you ask your husband to use his influence and help me get my parents out of Azkaban?"

"Lucius has fallen from grace, I'm afraid." Narcissa laughed bitterly. "Besides, most of his influence was because Bellatrix was his sister-in-law."

"But they are too old to be held there. They can't harm anyone." Tonks insisted passionately.

"They can't, indeed." Something in her aunt's voice gave Tonks a chilling feeling.

"Your parents are long dead. You betrayed your beloved 'woolfy' for nothing."

"But... but I visited them..."

"Well, well, my dear. You should know better than anyone that in the Wizarding World nothing has to be what it seems." Narcissa stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a funeral to arrange."

sss

"I'm dreaming, that's all. It must be a nightmare. This is not happening for real." Harry was standing in front of the Malfoy's manor watching the scene. Several slave children arrived and Head house-elf was there to escort them down below. Lucius and Draco stood a little bit farther. He could hear them talking.

"You can pick two or three of them to practice your Dark Arts. I'm not very pleased with your progress. You know very well that Defense against the Dark Arts is not in the official curriculum at Hogwarts

anymore. Only selected families are allowed to give their children private lessons, and of course we are among them. It will protect us from the next generation of blood traitors if it ever emerges. You'll know how to fight and they won't." Lucius was very pleased to give his son the same tirade over again.

"You know how much I hate those lessons. Couldn't you hire someone more pleasant than Snape?" Draco didn't share his father's enthusiasm. "He's even half-blood!"

"Yes, indeed he is. Otherwise he'd be your professor and Head of the House at Hogwarts. He's the best man for that job, since your aunt Bella refused to do me that favor. Learn from him. The Dark Arts have nothing to do with pleasure. It's all about hate and pain." Lucius left without waiting for the answer.

Draco rolled his eyes and looked boringly at the slaves. But suddenly he showed much more interest. His eyes were fixed at someone in the line. Harry turned and gasped in shock. The last two children in the line were Ginny and Rose. Not even mistreatment, malnutrition and rags could conceal their beauty. And they apparently attracted Draco's attention as well.

"Well, well, I just might use them for practice after all. Only I don't have to limit myself to Dark Arts only, do I?" He turned to Head house-elf. "Make sure these two have a proper bath and give them clean clothes. Oh, one more thing. Make sure they eat properly as well. They are little bit too skinny for my '*Dark Arts*' practice." He laughed.

"Yes master."

Harry screamed in anger and tried to leap on Draco. But his legs were firmly rooted in the ground. His scream was silent. He desperately tried to move with no effect.

"I'm dreaming, that's all. It must be a nightmare. This is not happening for real." He repeated to himself.

Then he woke up. It was dawn already and a faint light lit the hole he spent the night in. Harry had nightmares almost every night since he

woke up in the cellar that morning. It was usually about Rose, and he could never save her in his dreams. Sometimes Hermione, Ginny and Ron were there, as well. The worst of all in his nightmares was that many times Sirius would come to rescue them and was killed just when the freedom was already within reach.

Harry flicked his tongue to taste the air and finding nothing suspicious went out. He decided to remain a serpent while in the Forbidden Forest. He had to decide what to do. What had happened in his dream could happen in reality. Now he was even more determined to find and rescue Rose. But he couldn't do it without Sirius. And he had no idea how to find him. On the other hand nobody but him knew that Hermione was alive and taken to Hogwarts.

"I can do nothing for Rose just now, but I might rescue Hermione."

He headed towards Hogwarts. Once he was nearby he could use the map to locate Hermione and make a plan. But he couldn't move as fast as he wanted. The events from the previous day and especially evening exhausted him.

"It's probably because the Dark Magic drained most of my energy. But I can't afford to rest now. I have to save Hermione."

After a few hours Harry still couldn't see Hogwarts. He realised he was lost. He could barely move. In front of him he could see the hidden entrance into what seemed a cave. He wouldn't normally notice it, but now he had serpent senses. It seemed like a nice hideout where he could rest and recuperate. Harry tasted the air with his forked tongue as he was making his way in. Suddenly something didn't seem right.

Harry backed off, just in time to avoid a creature that pounced on him from a nearby tree.

"A GRIFFIN!"

The beast turned angrily and flew up making a circle above Harry.

"I have to make it to the bushes before it strikes again!"

He almost made it when the Griffin swooped down catching Harry's tail that was poking out of the bushes. Harry felt terrible pain as the beast dug its claws into his flesh. The griffin raised its beak ready to deliver the lethal blow, when Harry summoning all the energy he had left twisted his body and sank his poisonous fangs into the griffin's throat. The beast managed to give the final strike with its beak, before its lifeless body fell onto Harry.

He couldn't move. He could feel his blood dripping from the open wounds. The light was fading away, until everything went black.

sss

"I told you Lucius, I always interrogate prisoners alone. My methods need concentration and I won't be disturbed!" Snape was obviously upset while he was walking downstairs.

"It's out of the question. This prisoner might know something important, and you may not know what questions to ask." Lucius was arrogant as always. "May I remind you Severus, that we mustn't make any mistakes here?"

"Yes, you've already made enough of them." Snape sneered.

"*Professor Snape!*" Hermione exclaimed when they arrived. Snape tried to hide his surprise.

"Nobody has called me 'professor' for years. How do you know who I am?" He watched her through the thick iron bars of her cell.

"I know more than you can imagine!"

"Well, it *is* my *job* to find out what you know. What is your name?" Snape stepped inside her cell.

Lucius interrupted him impatiently. "Aren't you going to give her the potion?"

Snape turned to Lucius with open disgust.

“Interrogation is a precise and subtle science. I cross-examine the subject first, and then use Veritaserum. That way I can compare results...”

Lucius couldn't listen anymore. He was completely furious. “I don't have time for you to play your games. GET ON WITH IT! I need answers NOW!”

“As you wish!” Snape snapped and took a vial from his robes.

“You can drink this voluntarily, or I'll *make* you do it.”

Hermione didn't resist. She knew that nobody would believe the truth.

“Now, tell me who you really are?”

“Hermione Granger.” Hermione responded in a dull flat voice.

“Where did you learn magic?” Snape continued.

“At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

Lucius and Snape looked at each other in bewilderment.

“Who are your parents?”

“I'm a Muggle-born. My parents are Emma and Eric Granger. They live in London.”

“No Mudblood attended Hogwarts for years!” Lucius said to Snape.
“What is the matter with that potion?”

“Would you let me do my job? Some of us actually *work* for a living, you know.” Snape turned to Hermione.

“Why did you call me ‘professor’?”

“You were my Potions professor, before you killed Dumbledore and defected to Death Eaters' side.”

“Ha, Snape killed Dumbledore!” Lucius laughed.

“And when did that happen?” Snape ignored him.

“At the end of last term. Because of it all exams were canceled and I studied for nothing.”

Lucius interfered impatiently. “Is she crazy or merely Confunded?”

Snape started shaking in anger. “If you let me do it properly, I’d be able to tell!” He continued. “Who is that boy that came with you to the Forbidden Forest?”

“Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“Who lived *what?*”

“The Killing Curse. Lord Voldemort-“ Both Snape and Lucius flinched “- tried to kill him when Harry was just one-year-old. The Curse backfired and almost killed Voldemort who became half-dead and needed someone else’s body in order to exist.”

“This is ridiculous!” Lucius erupted. “The Dark Lord defeated by a baby-boy! I can’t listen to this *rubbish* any more. Your potion is not working, Severus. You will proceed the old-fashioned way. If you cannot do it, I’ll send Filch!” He slammed the door on his way out of the room.

“Where were we?” Snape looked amused after Lucius had gone. “Oh yes, I *know* you never attended Hogwarts. I’m afraid you’ll have to explain your story.”

“During the summer break, Harry found *Lia Fail* that took us to the past. We prevented the prophecy from being told, thus Voldemort didn’t have to kill Harry and the Curse never backfired. Voldemort grew stronger and the Death Eaters triumphed. Now the two of us remember both lives.”

“What did this prophecy say?”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal,

but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

Snape went pale and didn't say anything for a while.

"And what did you tell to the Resistance?"

"We told them that I graduated from Salem School for Witches. I joined the Weasleys in America and helped Harry in London and we decided to stay together."

"You fought very well in the battle. Who taught you Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"You did professor. You were my Defense against the Dark Arts teacher at sixth year. And there were a few others before you. The position is cursed, you see."

sss

Harry was slithering down a dark corridor. The pain on his forehead was pulsing stronger and stronger. He could see the light coming through an open door. He could recognize the voices. One commanding voice he will never forget.

"So we lost Bella, Parkinson and Goyle. Dolohov is in the St Mungo's with wounds that cannot heal because of unknown venom and all we have in return is one half-giant idiot dead and my precious item in the hands of my enemy!"

The owner of the voice got only the silence for an answer.

"Did you interrogate the girl?" The cold voice of Lord Voldemort asked someone in the room.

"Yes, my Lord." The voice belonged to Lucius Malfoy. "She was talking nonsense. She must be immune to Veritaserum."

“Allow me my Lord to explain.” Snape interrupted Lucius. After a brief pause he continued. “I wasn’t allowed to use my best methods to cross-examine the detainee. But as I continued I have found out who she really is.”

Harry inched closer. He could see the room. Voldemort was sitting in an armchair flanked by Crouch and Wormtail. Lucius and Snape stood in front of him.

“Yes?” Voldemort seemed interested.

“Her name is Hermione Granger. She’s a Mudblood. She graduated from Salem School for Witches where she was obviously recruited and brainwashed by those blood-traitors the Weasleys. She came here to join so-called Resistance. She met a boy she seems to believe is Harry Potter. According to her story there is recruiting going on in America. They organized training camps and we can expect more to come.”

“I knew it!” Crouch murmured.

“Yes Barty, we all know what you think the Weasleys are doing.” Voldemort said. “Severus, are you certain, that she told you the truth?”

“Without being able to conduct a proper interrogation” he glared at Lucius “I cannot guarantee, My Lord. However I trust this is the real truth. I believe that the cover story was intended to convince us that she is mentally disturbed.”

Harry was already in the room, but nobody seemed to notice him.

“We should teach the Weasleys a lesson. Let’s transfer their two bastards to Hogwarts. Their friends in the Forbidden Forest will find out and let them know. We’ll see how keen they will be about their ‘cause’ when they learn that Filch has his hands on their offspring. And you Severus will continue with interrogation. Use your best methods and find out everything she knows. Everything! And one more thing... ” Voldemort furiously looked at Lucius, “I don’t want him to be disturbed!”

sss

Harry woke up feeling terrible pain all over his body. He felt too weak to move. He was unbearably thirsty and shaking in fever. He couldn't see anything in the darkness. *"I must be human again!"* Then he passed out once more.

sss

Harry stood in the crowd that was passing by without noticing his presence. The scar was aching again, almost unbearably. In front of him stood Narcissa dressed all in black mourning robes with a veil over her face. Draco stood by her side. Voldemort came to express his condolences. "Your sister will be avenged. I promise."

Voldemort stepped onto a podium that was obviously prepared in advance and started his speech.

"Dear comrades,

We are gathered here to say the last farewell to one of the greatest witches of our time and my dearest friend – Bellatrix Black Lestrangle. Even when she was only a student she well understood that the purity of blood is the primal value that keeps our world together. But the purity of blood means nothing if we can be persuaded of the absurdity that our blood is worthless. And that was exactly what Albus Dumbledore and his servants tried to implant. They claimed that there was no value in blood. They said race was completely insignificant. He and the other blood traitors wanted to use mudbloods and half-bloods to their own dark and selfish purpose and gain power to rule our world. If it wasn't for Bellatrix and my faithful followers, they would have succeeded and the darkness would have been fallen upon our lands."

Voldemort raised his fist as he spoke about Dumbledore. He paused looking harshly at the silent crowd.

"The blood traitors are raising their ugly heads once more, and spreading fear and terror among honest, hard working wizards. And yet again Bellatrix bravely stood in their way. She was cowardly murdered from the back by the same blood traitors that would never

dare to openly face her. I am telling them: make no mistake; you will fail miserably and we will prevail. I know that because the truth and the justice are on our side.

But we were patient long enough, waiting for them to come to their senses. Standing in front of this grave I am also telling our people and the world: From today, you will have no option to stay aside and wait to see what is going to happen. Either you are with us, or you are against us! And to those who are against us, we shall show no mercy.

Rest in peace Bella, we will make sure you didn't die in vain. Your death will be avenged!"

He stepped down and followed by Wormtail and Crouch left the ceremony.

sss

Harry woke up in pain again. His fever was gone but he was sweaty and all wet. The thirst was even worse. This time he managed to move, but he painfully cried out.

"No, no, you must stay in bed." Harry recognized the hissing.

"*Athena!*" He tried to see through the darkness. "*How did you find me?*" He felt relieved when he heard her.

"*After spending most of my life in Hogwarts, I still have some connections in the Forbidden Forest. Now you must have some rest.*"

"*No, wait. I'm so thirsty.*" Though he felt weak, he wanted to stay awake. Everything but going back to his nightmares. And he was thirsty.

"*Your wand is on your right side.*"

Harry groped around and found the wand. "*Lumos!*"

He could finally see where he was. It was apparently the cavern he tried to enter when he was attacked by the griffin. He looked around. The light from his wand caused the slick stone walls to glow in

emerald green as if they were gem-studded. The chamber he was lying in was no more than 30 feet in radius and 20 feet tall. He could hear the water running, most probably from the other chamber that he could barely see to his left. The floor was covered with feathers and bones. The “bed” Athena mentioned was actually a sort of nest, surprisingly comfortable. Obviously Griffin used the cavern as its lair. He remembered that very often Griffins guard a treasure or a valuable item, but he didn’t give it too much thought as he had other things to worry about.

Even in such a condition it wasn’t difficult for Harry to conjure some food and water. Harry was too weak to sit but he managed to turn on his side and help himself somehow. The serpent let him eat in silence.

“What brought you here? I thought you weren’t interested in joining me.” He asked her after finally finishing his snack.

“Something came up.” Athena was deliberately mysterious.

“Athena, please!” Harry tried to sit again, but only managed to lean on his elbows.

“All right, all right. I know you are not one of my students, and I’m not a professor anymore. I need you to do me a favor.”

“You’ve just saved my life! Anything I can do, just ask!” Harry said full heartedly.

“I’ll take this as a promise.” She paused for a few seconds slithering closer to Harry. *“You see, no matter what my family did to me, I am still a Malfoy. I just cannot let the last and the only offspring of our bloodline die.”*

“It’s Draco, isn’t it? Why would he die? What does it have to do with me?” Harry asked.

“You see, you took something that belongs to Voldemort from Lucius’ library. Voldemort made Draco to give the Unbreakable Vow that he would return the item to him in six weeks. He is very clever and cunning, that Voldemort. Almost like his forefather, Salazar Slytherin. He knew it had something to do with me. And he knew I wouldn’t

move my tongue to help Lucius. So he made Draco to give the Oath. Now I need this item to be given to Draco. That is the favor I'm asking from you."

Harry listened to her in silence. He wished he had been as clever and cunning as Voldemort. He couldn't refuse Athena after all she did for him. But he couldn't give Voldemort the only Horcrux he has gotten so far.

"I understand. Let me think about it, would you. After all I won't be going anywhere for some time." He looked at the terrible wounds on his legs. "I'll feel better if I turn into a snake, I guess."

"Most certainly, as long as you don't forget to lie in the sun from time to time to warm up your blood. Otherwise you can be slowed down quite a bit and feel terrible fever when you become human again. Anyhow, the coldness of your blood made the bleeding stop and that's how you survived these wounds."

sss

Hermione was sitting on the floor of the cell Filch moved her in. It was small with no furniture in it, separated from the other cell by massive iron bars. So she could see when Filch brought in two more children and chained them to the wall. Hermione didn't like the way he was laughing. He took his crop and hit them several times before leaving. It was obvious that he enjoyed himself.

"This is just the beginning, you little scum. We'll see what your parents will do when they hear where you are. Come on, Mrs. Norris!" He left the dungeons whistling some cheerful tune.

When she couldn't hear him anymore, Hermione came close to the bars and had a look at the children. She saw a red-haired boy and girl in dirty rags. The boy was bleeding from his lips and the left eyebrow. The girl had two fresh stripes across her neck and cheek. They were so skinny and pale that Hermione stepped backwards in horror.

"Ron, Ginny, what have they done to you?" She whispered.

They looked at her in surprise, like someone who was suddenly woken from a nightmare.

“Who are you?” Ginny asked in a low voice. “Where are we?”

Chapter Eight – Friend and Foe

Two serpents were lying in the sun. Harry felt so much better after another day of rest. He could even read the book he also took from Lucius' library. It was very old and contained arcane Dark Magic which described how to control dreams.

"Athena, I can't give you the diary now, but I promise that Draco will have it before the sixth week expires. I'll trade it for my sister and Hermione. They're as important to me as Draco is to you." Harry spoke slowly watching Athena's reaction.

"I see." Athena was thinking for a while. *"You are getting smarter when you are a serpent. It is true that you promised to do anything I ask, but not immediately though. In this way you can get what you want and still keep the promise. Bravo!"*

Harry sighed in relief. *"I'm glad you approve."*

"I saw you reading a book. Where did you get it?" Athena asked after a while.

"Malfoy's library."

"Lucius is such a fool, that's what he is." She sighed. *"Just collecting items to show off, never looking into them and their real value."*

"So you know this book, don't you?" Harry became interested.

"I know about that book." Athena answered slowly.

"What is it?" He asked eagerly.

"That book, my dear boy, is so dangerous that it wasn't even in the Restricted Section of Hogwarts. If you have an extraordinary ability or talent, that book can teach you how to use it. But the book has a mind of its own."

"How?"

"It doesn't open to everyone." Athena continued. "Just the fact that you are reading it is a great honor. And it knows exactly what to show you. That book is different to everyone that reads it. The last one who opened the book was..."

"Let me guess" Harry interrupted, "Tom Riddle."

"Precisely. Nobody knows what he learnt. But be warned, you can easily loose your mind, reading it."

"I'm loosing my mind anyways." Harry moved into the shade. They were both quiet for a while. "How much longer will it take for these wounds to heal?"

"A couple of weeks at least. Try to rest as much as possible. You can take care of yourself and I have to go now."

"I don't want you to leave!!"

"You can always send me a message by Patronus. Goodbye now."

"Goodbye Athena, and thank you for everything."

sss

Hermione wasn't sure what to say. She decided to be as friendly as possible, without telling much.

"You don't know me, but I know you and your family. Do you remember anything that happened to you lately?" She asked.

"Yes we do, but it's like it's been happening to someone else, until now." Ginny said.

"You were cursed, but it's lifted somehow. You *must* pretend you are still enchanted!" Hermione came closer.

"Where are we?" Ron mumbled through swollen lips. Hermione hardly recognized his voice.

"We are in the Hogwarts dungeon. The one that locked you in is Filch."

"We know about him. Our brothers made fun of him all the time." Ginny cheered up a little bit when she mentioned her brothers.

"He'll have his revenge now, won't he?" Ron couldn't hide that he was terrified of the thought.

"Someone will come to our rescue! Don't give up." Hermione tried to convince herself more than Ginny and Ron. She knew how difficult it was to break into Hogwarts. She didn't even know how the battle ended and what happened to Harry and Sirius.

sss

"You know Arthur, it was completely foolish and reckless to come over here, bringing the rest of your children with you." McGonagall argued with Arthur Weasley, who had just come into the Headquarters.

"Actually Percy stayed with Molly in the Massachusetts. I couldn't leave her alone."

Arthur didn't look concerned by McGonagall's comment. Bill, Fred and George were hugging Charlie behind them.

"You won't really charge at Hogwarts, will you? That's exactly what they want you to do."

"Of course not Minerva, Arthur knows better than that." Moody came between them shaking Arthur's hand. "Nice to see you again Arthur. Bill, Fred, George." He nodded to each one of them.

"Actually, *I'm* Fred, and *he's* George."

Moody grunted and waved off. Angelina Johnson giggled. One of the twins nudged the other who blushed and pushed him back. Cedric Diggory didn't look pleased with the scene.

"Just what we needed," Moody grumbled. "More lovebirds."

"We have a plan-" Fred (or George) started.

“We’ll go to the hideout, take the cloak and the map-“ George (or Fred) continued

“Sneak into the Hogwarts-“ Fred (or George) continued

“We’re good in that-“ George (or Fred) continued

“Get to the point, *brother*-“ Fred (or George) continued

“Find Ginny and Ron-“ George (or Fred) continued

“Say hello to Filch-“ Fred (or George) continued

“And come back out with the kids-“ George (or Fred) continued

“Piece of cake!” They high-fived in unison.

Moody rolled his eyes. “I think we all need a drink!”

“I’m afraid Harry already took the map and cloak. But there is one bottle of Firewhisky left.” Sirius entered the room.

“You mean Harry *Potter*!” One of the twins exclaimed. “Where is he?”

“I wish I knew. We searched the Forest but no trace of him. All we know is that they don’t have him either.” The grin disappeared from Sirius’ face.

“Is it true that Harry killed Bella?” The twins asked in unison.

“Yes he did. And he saved my life.”

“COOL!” The twins were nodding their heads.

“That’s enough boys. We didn’t come here to have fun!” Arthur obviously lost his patience. “Unpack yourselves while I’m in the meeting.”

sss

It had been several days since the battle when Hermione heard unknown steps approaching her cell. Since she told him about Lia

Fail and the Prophecy Snape wasn't interested too much in real world affairs. He wanted to know every single detail about his days at Hogwarts and rebirth of Voldemort. He would come early morning, cast the ***Imperturbable Charm*** on Hermione's cell and start questioning. He was more curious than hostile. Two things were particularly confusing to him. The first one was that Dumbledore let him be professor after his defected from Death Eaters, and the second that he killed Dumbledore later on. Snape couldn't understand why. Hermione couldn't answer either. Anyways, nobody but Snape went down to the dungeons and Hermione was relieved that at least Ron and Ginny were not tortured for the time being. She knew it had to be because of her and she tried to keep Snape busy and interested. It wasn't particularly difficult. Snape enjoyed being 'professor' again and in several occasions he even asked her some tough questions from Potions and Dark Arts lessons. Needless to say Hermione couldn't resist impressing him with her knowledge. She missed Hogwarts so much that even conversation with Snape in the dungeons wasn't that unpleasant. Hermione even thought that if he had been like that in 'other' world he wouldn't have been so unpopular.

But that morning it was someone else coming to the bars that kept Hermione in her cell.

"Who did you betray today, Tonks?" Hermione asked coldly when Tonks appeared in the dungeons.

"I guess I deserve this." Tonks said sadly. "I came to help you escape."

"Why should I trust you?"

"I believe this belongs to you." Tonks pulled Hermione's wand from her robes. Hermione hesitated for a moment and took it.

"Why did you do it?" Hermione was still hostile.

"They held my parents in Azkaban. At least that's what they told me. Only the morning after the battle I found out they were long dead." Tonks looked through the window trying to hold her tears.

“How touching!” Snape’s dry, sarcastic voice made them jump in surprise.

“YOU!” Tonks turned so quickly that she lost her balance and fell. Her wand rolled towards Snape.

“I trust you’ll need this, Nymphadora.” Snape silently levitated it back to Tonks. Hermione had to admit to herself that there was a great deal of style and elegance in the way he waved his wand. Tonks was stunned for a moment, and then she took her wand, stood up, wiped the dust from her robes and snarled

“It’s Tonks!”

Hermione was pointing her wand towards Snape. She was confused with his entrance and even more with his action.

“Nice posture Miss Granger. Very good. I’d give five points to Gryffindor if I were still a professor.” Snape almost laughed at himself.

“What?” Tonks looked at him in amazement. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Snape and Hermione locked eyes, completely ignoring her. Without blinking Snape said, “It’s nice to see you have your wand again Miss Granger. Let’s check your reflexes.”

“Expelliarmus!”

Hermione twisted her wrist and blocked it easily.

“REDUCTO!”

She blocked it again. *“Stupefy!”* Snape only just blocked it obviously surprised with the strength and precision of the spell.

“You had a good teacher.” Snape tidied his hair from his forehead. Since the first interrogation he changed his hairstyle and his robes were not as dull as usual.

“It was professor Lupin!” At those words Tonks went pale.

“Stop it! JUST STOP IT!” She shrieked. “How do you know Remus? And why did you call him ‘professor’?”

Hermione had to quickly make up an answer. “Bill and Charlie used to call him that, because he is always so earnest.”

Tonks had a faraway look in her eyes and said wistfully “Yes he is, isn’t he?”

“Well, we had enough fun. Let’s get on with our business.” Snape unlocked the cells and with two slight moves of his wand unchained Ginny and Ron. They looked at him with wide eyes.

“I don’t need to lift the curse. Your presence Miss Granger obviously did the trick.” He added.

Hermione’s heart sunk. *“He knew it all the time. Did he tell anyone? What is he up to?”* Questions were running through her head. Snape was looking at her obviously enjoying the confusion he caused.

“What business?” Hermione was still on guard. “I don’t want to have any business with you! Nor you traitor!” She turned to Tonks. The situation was almost comic.

“And how do you plan to leave Hogwarts single-handedly, with two helpless children?” Snape sneered. “Unless you’re leaving them behind.”

“Never!”

Ginny and Ron winced from the strength of her voice.

“Why would you help us anyways?” Hermione asked suspiciously.

“Apart from the fact that I was dismissed from Hogwarts just for being a half-blood...”

Snape’s eyes flared in anger, “No reason at all.”

“Half-blood Prince!”

sss

Harry couldn't stop reading the book. It was dragging him deeper and deeper into the dark, hidden corners of his mind and soul. He learnt that his dreams didn't have to be accidental. He learnt he could control them. It didn't work in the beginning. But in time he managed to see in his dreams the places he wanted. Usually he would be slithering after Voldemort. Several times he managed to see Sirius and Hermione. But his dreams didn't last long and he couldn't make any sense of them. He learnt in time that more he controlled what to see, or rather where to be in his dreams, more painful his scar would be. On the brighter side, his usual nightmares were almost completely gone.

"I have to read more, before I can do it right."

But the book would reveal to him only as much as it thought he could understand. Every day, bit-by-bit, he would learn just a little bit more. Every time he managed to control his dreams, the book would let him to read more.

That day, Harry was looking at the pictures of past Headmasters and Headmistresses. He tried to find Athena, but it seemed that she wasn't in her portrait at the moment. Slughorn was sitting at his desk writing something, when a powerful blast shook the windows. Seconds later they could hear someone shouting:

"It's coming from the dungeons!"

Slughorn jumped from his chair and bolted out of the office. Harry followed him. On their way down, they were joined by a few professors, and Filch. Snape and a few others were already at the dungeons when they arrived.

"What did happen here?" Slughorn asked.

"The prisoners are gone!" Filch exclaimed.

"How did it happen?"

"It seems that little witch blasted the hole in the wall and escaped with the other two. She must have had a wand concealed in her robes." Said a witch Harry didn't recognize.

“Or someone from Hogwarts helped her get out.” Harry heard Snape’s voice from behind.

Everyone nervously turned to Snape. After a couple of seconds of tense silence they slowly continued talking about the incident.

Harry looked up and saw the big hole at the end of the corridor. The rubble of stones was on the floor and he could see the sky and a part of the lake through the opening. Some of the staff were searching around for clues.

“I found something!” A witch in Hogwarts staff robes was holding what looked like a finger. Something about the scene was familiar to Harry.

Slughorn came closer. “I know that ring. It belonged to Tonks! When did she come here and why?” Nobody knew the answer.

“This is outrageous. What am I going to say to the Dark Lord now? When I was in Hogwarts something like this would never happen. No one ever escaped from Hogwarts dungeon before.” Snape was obviously enjoying the situation. “And now, since I have no prisoners to question, I must depart for London. Headmaster, thank you for your *hospitality*.” He put a delicate stress on hospitality.

Harry woke up panting. “*Hermione wouldn’t kill anyone, ever. They imitated Wormtail.*” He shook his head in the darkness. “*But it would mean that Tonks helped Hermione escape. It doesn’t fit. And somebody said prisoners. It means she wasn’t alone there. Who was detained with her? Nothing makes sense.*” He took his wand and illuminated the chamber. After a dream like that he would always open the book to see whether it would let him read some more. There was nothing new this time.

Disappointed, Harry looked at his wounds that he tried to heal in the last few days. He remembered the spell Snape used to heal Draco after the *Sectumsempra* spell. It didn’t work that well in the beginning but now he was almost restored to health.

“*I’ve got to find the way to Hogwarts. The map will show whether Hermione is still there!*”

SSS

Harry left the cave in the morning. After lying in the sun for a while he headed west. This time he knew where to go, because Athena had told him. He was moving fast and reached the edge of the forest before noon. He planned to turn into human there, use the cloak and enter the Hogwarts grounds. Then he could use the map.

But just before he did it, Harry heard footsteps. He hid in the bushes, and waited. Then he heard whispering that was awfully familiar.

“Oh please, George,” Fred was saying. “What about that girl you had a crush on when we were in sixth year? She had a strange name... Leeloo or Luloo or something. And what about-“

“First of all, her name was *Lucy* and second, what about that girl that you followed around for three days?”

“That was because you slipped a love potion in my juice!”

“Oh yeah. I get mixed up sometimes.”

“Okay children, we’re not here on a picnic.” Bill snapped. “We are here to-“

“Show off your *fantastic* combat skills, yeah we know.”

Arthur ignored them. “We’ll have to wait until nightfall. Then we can sneak in and find out what happened in the dungeons.”

“You don’t have to wait, Mr. Weasley.” Harry stepped out from his hiding spot. “Someone can come with me - under this.” At his arrival they turned and were pointing their wands at him.

“Blimey...it can’t be...” Arthur said in amazement.

“HARRY!” The twins yelled. Charlie was still holding his wand. “How do we know he’s not an imposter?”

Harry grinned turning to Fred and George. "When Ron was five you turned his favorite toy into a spider. He's had arachnophobia ever since."

Arthur angrily turned to the twins. "So, that's why he's *terrified* of spiders! And dungeons are *filled* with them! Wait until your mother hears about this!"

"Thanks a lot, mate." muttered George, at the same time Fred said "Traitor. You betrayed our trust."

They all lowered their wands.

"What do you mean by dungeons are full of spiders?" Harry asked.

"Oh you most probably don't know that they took Ron and Ginny to the Hogwarts dungeons. Merlin knows what Filch is doing to them. We heard that there was a blast that killed one of Death Eaters and some of the prisoners have escaped."

"So it's true." Harry said to himself. The whole morning he doubted that what he saw in his dream was real. He reached to his pocket. "Let's check it out. I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good." He tapped the map. The Weasleys gathered around him.

Charlie was the first to break the silence.

"They're not there. Ginny and Ron aren't in Hogwarts!"

Chapter Nine – Obsessed

“But where would they go?” Arthur asked on their way to the Headquarters. “I only hope they aren’t in even worse hands than before.”

“Don’t worry Mr. Weasley, Hermione will take good care of them until we go and get them.” Harry said nonchalantly.

“Hermione who? And where are we going to get them from?”

“Hermione Granger. She’s my best friend. I’d trust her with my life. I told her a lot about Ron and Ginny. She must be taking them to your hideout.”

“How does she *know* about the hideout?” Arthur stopped and turned to Harry.

“We spent two days hiding there, until Tonks came for us.” Harry replied.

“Wow Harry! Well done mate!” The twins looked proud.

“It’s not what you think!”

“Yeah right!”

“Sure, we all believe you.”

“Be serious for once in your life, will you?” Arthur rubbed his forehead like he had a big headache.

“I’ll send her my Patronus as soon as we arrive.” Harry said.

“You can summon a Patronus?” Bill exclaimed. “That’s powerful magic.”

“It can’t be that powerful if *Percy* can do it.” Fred interrupted scornfully.

“You’ll see.” Then Harry turned to Arthur.

“But Mr. Weasley, I thought you were in America?”

"We arrived this morning when we heard that Ron and Ginny were detained in Hogwarts." Arthur answered.

"How did you come?"

"We used smugglers' Floo Network to Dublin. We arrived at Dragon's Lair pub in CapelStreetI know the owner, Ryan Curran. He's not afraid of Voldemort and has a healthy appetite for gold. We flew on our broomsticks from there."

"You flew all the way from Dublin!"

"We had to in order to avoid Voldemort's spies. Dublin is full of them. It's not that bad once you cast the cockpit spell." Bill joined. "It's very popular in America. They like to travel all over the continent in groups and have a lot of fun. It's easy I'll show you." Bill pulled his broomstick and demonstrated the spell.

Harry tried it on his Firebolt. He couldn't move as easily as without it, but it was warm and comfortable inside, like in a small chamber. The room on the broomstick was enhanced to accommodate three more persons.

Bill looked at his Firebolt. "Wait the second. This is not a standard model. It's specially prepared like those that seekers in professional league ride! Where did you get it?"

"I took it from Draco Malfoy as a compensation for making his bed for years." Harry grinned.

"Not many people are able to ride a broomstick like that." Fred and George were impressed. "Can we try?"

"Some other time boys. We have to hurry now." Arthur reminded them.

sss

"You know Moony, it should be the other way around. I should be the one that's drinking, *you* should be the one that's preaching." Sirius

was obviously worried. He hadn't seen Remus drunk since they graduated from Hogwarts.

"I loved her Sirius. I'd die for her." Remus was crying.

"For Merlin's sake Moony, pull yourself together. She was using you. If Miss S.S.W. hadn't killed her I certainly would have!"

"But now I'll never know!"

"Know what?"

"Why she'd done it. There must have been a reason. There must have! I know she loved me!" Remus didn't bother to pour the drink into a glass. He drank straight from the bottle.

"You'll kill yourself if you continue!"

"Well, maybe I *want* to kill myself! Did you think about that? Do you EVER think about ANYONE except YOURSELF?"

"That's enough. Remus, mate, I'm really sorry about this, but it's for your own good." Then he punched Remus. He was instantly knocked out and continued sleeping on the floor.

Moody entered the room. "Oh, you've handled this yourself. Good." He said approvingly. "The Weasleys are back. With Harry."

Sirius bolted from the room.

He found the Weasleys and Harry already surrounded by others. Everybody had a question for Harry. Finally Sirius managed to calm them down.

"I believe you should have this Cedric. I'm sorry." Harry pulled a wand from his robes as he turned to Cedric.

The others stepped back in silence to give Cedric a way.

"It's my father's wand!" Cedric took it visibly shaken. "Where did you get it?"

“From Malfoy’s trophy shelf.” Harry said slowly. He knew all but too well how Cedric felt. “Lucius bragged that the wands he kept there belonged to those that he personally slain. I’m so sorry Cedric for telling you this, but I believe you deserve to know the truth.”

“Bastard! He’ll pay for this! I swear I’ll kill him with this very wand!” He looked at Harry who went pale. “Are you all right?”

“I’m OK.” Harry said and fainted.

Madam Pomfrey stepped forward. “Everybody move. Make some space.” She kneeled next to Harry and noticed blood on his robes. Obviously his wounds hadn’t healed completely and after too much physical exertion that morning they’d opened again.

“He lost some blood and he’s exhausted, but he’ll be fine in the morning. Let’s take him to the hospital wing.”

She had no idea that that ‘weak’ boy would wake up before evening and cast the Patronus spell.

sss

Ginny was sobbing.

Hermione tried her best to heal their wounds. Then she conjured some food and water.

“Let’s eat and get some sleep. Everything will look better in the morning.”

Hermione looked at Ginny and Ron. The curse and mistreatment had made a devastating effect. They were smaller than she remembered them and even though they were 16 and 17 years old, their minds were still like they were 10 and 11. They had that naïve and childish expression in their eyes that was begging for shelter and comfort. And they had had a day full of excitement. After blasting the wall Snape gave them two broomsticks. Hermione took Ginny and Tonks Ron and they flew at full speed almost touching the ground. Hermione was never a big fan of Quidich, but she loved to fly and she managed to keep the pace with Tonks. Before she departed from

them, Tonks modified the children's memory by erasing the events since that morning. Only Hermione and Snape knew that she was still alive. For Ginny and Ron, Hermione was their sole savior.

But the excitement wasn't over yet. Just as she was tucking Ginny into her bedroll, a beautiful silvery stag appeared in the room. She took the parchment attached to it.

Dear Hermione,

We know about your escape and will pick you and the others up tomorrow at the same time and place as the last time.

Harry

Hermione flipped the parchment over and scribbled quickly.

OK. See you there.

Hermione

When the stag left she turned to the Weasleys. Ron and Ginny were fast asleep.

sss

"Rodolphus. Welcome to my humble home. Let's go into my library." Lucius was falsely sweet.

"So, what is the news you have for me?" He asked when the door closed behind them.

"Hermione Granger escaped from Hogwarts, yesterday morning." Rodolphus said in a flat voice. "She took the Weasley bastards with her and killed your niece on her way out."

"What's going on? Kids are killing grown up witches and wizards like *pixies*." Lucius was visibly nervous.

"It seems they are taking their children back and teaching them to fight." Rodolphus sneered, "Really Lucius you need to keep in touch."

"What's on your mind Rodolphus?" Lucius knew that his brother-in-law never offered anything for free.

"You see Lucius, I know that you're after something they have. I happen to have something *they* might want." He paused dramatically.

"I'm listening."

"*My* lovely wife, needless to say *late* wife, left everything she owned to *your* lovely wife. It would be just, don't you think, if I had my fair share of the inheritance."

"And what do you offer in return?"

"Good old Lucius. Always willing to bargain." Rodolphus enjoyed himself.

"I offer Rose Potter."

sss

Sirius didn't expect her to look at him like that. After all, she was *supposed* to be Harry's girlfriend. Why else would Harry stay behind for her?

He decided to be polite and reserved. Even though he didn't really *mind* her looking at him that way.

"Sirius, I want you to meet my best friend, Hermione Granger. Hermione, my godfather Sirius Black."

"Pleasure." Hermione shook his hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Only good things I hope." Sirius gave her his most charming smile.

"Your Hogwarts days, too." She smiled back.

Moody cut in. "I didn't know they taught that kind of magic at Salem."

"*Straight to the point as usual, Mad-Eye.*" Sirius thought.

“And you must be the famous Auror and second in command, Mad-Eye Moody.” Hermione was smiling pleasantly. He looked taken aback. “You are right about Salem school, but they have an extensive library and also Bill Weasley had several meetings which I attended, where he demonstrated Defense Against the Dark Arts.” She looked at Bill.

“Yes certainly, I think I saw her there a few times, sitting in the rear bench.”

“Not many wizards can defend themselves against the Killing Curse if any. I don’t see how you can learn that from books! There is no documented counter spell or shield to protect from it. If there were, I’d know! ”

“The most important is that she saved Ron and Ginny!” Harry interrupted. “I wish I could say the same for Rose.” Deep sadness crossed his face at those words.

Moody was about to say something, but Sirius gave him a look and he backed off.

Charlie pulled Bill aside. “I don’t know her, do you?”

Bill answered in a low voice “It wouldn’t be *nice* if she was there and I didn’t notice her. Besides, she saved Ginny and Ron, and it’s more than enough for me.”

They joined Sirius and the others. Sirius was giving Harry, Hermione and the Weasleys the tour.

“The place was designed by professor Dumbledore himself. He called some of his old friends to help him out. It is completely undetectable from the outside. The interior is magically extended, so we have enough room for an entire army. Everybody who enters by his or her free will is bound by the secret keeper vow and can’t tell anyone its location nor who’s in it. Every time you step out of the designated perimeter you appear at a random location in the Forbidden Forest. The same is for returning back. You reach certain points in the forest and by stepping into them you are stepping into the Headquarters. It applies only to those who are already bound by the vow. Others can’t

follow even if they step into exactly the same place. Many times we escaped just in front of their noses like that.”

Sirius laughed.

“Here is the dining room, we have a huge library, potions lab, hospital wing and almost everything you’d find in Hogwarts. Only we don’t have Houses and it’s less luxurious.”

Hermione was amazed. “It’s unbelievable! They can never get us here.”

Sirius smiled.

“Hermione, I was there and I heard Karkaroff casting the Killing Curse. He’s not a kind of wizard who’d miss a clear shot. If you know how to block it you must tell us. Many good people’s lives can be saved. “

“I’ll tell you what happened when I get some rest if it’s not a problem.” Hermione answered. She was worried how long Harry’s and her story would hold without raising suspicions.

“Of course. Madam Pomfrey is waiting for you and the Weasleys. She doesn’t want a repeat of what happened to Harry yesterday.”

sss

The next morning Hermione stepped into the room with mixed feelings. She promised Sirius she would explain how she had defended herself against the Killing Curse. She didn’t expect it to be in front of an audience. And now she found herself standing terrified in the middle of a crowded room. At the table she was facing were sitting Minerva McGonagall, Alastor Mad-Eye Moody, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Arthur Weasley. On her left and right stood others. She glanced across the room and spotted many familiar faces. Angelina gave her an encouraging smile. Bill nodded his head approvingly. She could see Harry showing her his fingers crossed. The setting looked awfully like a trial.

When Sirius stood up everybody looked at him in silence. His face was stern, but his eyes were smiling at her. Somehow she felt much better.

“Hermione, I know that this looks like a trial, but we’re gathered here in hope that we can learn something from you. I wanted everyone to hear what you have to say.” He bowed with a gesture that meant that she could start and sat down.

“I...” Hermione started slowly. “I assume you want to hear how I blocked the Killing Curse.” She looked around. She remembered what Dumbledore said to Harry about his mother’s sacrifice that saved his life. Then she continued in a firm voice.

“The Killing Curse cannot be blocked by the power of knowledge and precise spell casting. That’s because its strength comes from the hate. The caster must hate his victim. There must be the ultimate desire to take life, to kill. And there is only one magic that is stronger than hate, and only that magic can counter the Killing Curse.” Hermione paused.

“And what is that powerful magic?” Moody asked.

“It is love!”

Rumor rippled through the audience.

“At the moment I realized what Karkaroff was casting, in a flashback I saw my parents. I felt that instant the same emotion as I felt when I was leaving them. I always loved them, but I never felt it more intense, then that evening when I said my last goodbye. I evoked that feeling as I cast the Protego charm. But even the strongest feeling cannot give the shield enough energy to protect against the Killing Curse. So instead of a shield I visualized the beam of light leaving the tip of my wand and attacking the curse itself. I was lucky enough to cast it at the same time as he did. “

“Love! What rubbish!” Moody stood up. “I don’t want to listen to this anymore!”

"Alastor, love *is* the oldest and most powerful magic. Only we almost forgot it. Thank you Hermione for reminding us." McGonagall stopped him.

"I believe her!" Sirius said firmly.

"Oh you do believe her don't you? Why I'm not surprised?" Then he turned to Hermione. "Prove it! Show us!" He stepped towards Hermione pulling out his wand. "What if I cast the Killing Curse now?"

"Mad-Eye, are you out of your mind?" Arthur jumped. "You'll hurt her only over my dead body!"

"Who said I was going to target her?" He pointed to someone behind Sirius. "I always hated that squeaky little monster. Now Sirius, if you really believe her, why don't you command your house-elf to stand here."

Sirius clenched his teeth. "Kreacher! Stand where this man tells you!" He looked at Hermione. "I believe her."

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. There was no way out. She looked pitifully at the small creature that was shaking in horror before her feet. She pulled her wand out determined to protect him at all cost. Everybody behind her moved to the other side of the room.

"*AVADA...*

Hermione didn't have problems evoking the same feeling again. It never left her since she gave the last look at her parents window the evening she left with Harry. She saw the moment when she blocked Karkaroff's spell hundreds of times in her thoughts, over and over again. She routinely made her move and cast her counterspell just a moment before Moody finished his.

"*PROTEGO!*"

The beam of white light hit the green light as soon as it left Moody's wand and dissipated it in thousands of rays that ended hitting the ceiling.

Kreacher opened his eyes. "Mudblood saved Kreacher's life. Oh what a shame. Oh what a shame for the Black family!"

Sirius pulled his wand out aiming at his house-elf. "You little..."

"NO!" Hermione stood in front of the little creature. "Don't hurt him please! He doesn't know better! It's not his fault. If we treat him kindly and with respect, he might learn."

Everyone looked at her in silence. "What is she talking about?" someone asked in disgust.

Harry broke in. "She's Muggle-born and she studied in America."

"Of course." Sirius lowered his wand. "Very well, I won't punish him this time."

Moody came closer. "I'm sorry Miss Granger, it was necessary." He turned without waiting for the answer. "But I still don't get it. The only wizard that could teach her this died six years ago!" He said as he walked away, shaking his head.

Angelina came first and shook her hand. "It was amazing! I can't believe it! You were absolutely fantastic!" Others joined in. Everybody had something to say or to shake her hand.

Harry was grinning widely. "They adore you." He whispered in her ear. Then he looked at Moody who was slowly leaving the room. "What's wrong with Mad-Eye?" he asked.

"The Parkinsons keep his two granddaughters as slaves." Angelina answered quietly. "Everybody here lost someone, and some of us lost everyone."

sss

"I'm leaving you Lucius. As soon as this is over, I'm leaving you. Forever."

Harry was in the Malfoy's parlor. Lucius and Narcissa were facing each other. Both looked extremely angry. But he didn't pay attention

to them. He was looking at a small hazel-eyed girl with red hair. She was dressed in rags and stood there without any expression on her face. She looked underfed and mistreated.

“ROSE! ROSE! ROSE!” He tried to reach her, but his hand went through her, he lost his balance and fell under the coffee table. The tea set rattled for a moment. Narcissa and Lucius looked towards him like they could see something. That instant he woke up.

Hermione was shaking him. Sirius and Remus stood by his bed.

“Harry, wake up!” She shouted. “You’ve been yelling in your sleep!”

Harry looked at her like he had just seen her for the first time.

“WHY DID YOU WAKE ME UP? NEVER, *EVER* WAKE ME UP AGAIN! DID YOU HEAR ME?” He pushed Hermione away and fell back on the bed.

“Leave! All of you leave! I’ve got to sleep. I’ve got to...” He fell asleep with his eyes half open. His body was twitching.

Hermione looked like he had just slapped her. She burst into tears. She turned to Sirius and buried her face into his shoulder.

“He was never mean to me, before. Never!”

Sirius didn’t know what to do. At last he hugged her awkwardly and patted her hair.

“Don’t take it so seriously. He had a nightmare, that’s all. Now would you *please* stop crying?” He gently laid his hands on her shoulders and stepped back. Hermione tried to hide her face behind her hair.

“Sorry.” She was completely embarrassed.

“Remus, would you take Hermione to the kitchen and make her a cup of tea? Please? I’ll stay with Harry, just in case.”

When they left, he touched his shoulder. The robes were still warm and wet.

sss

Harry was at the Malfoys again.

"And what are *you* giving up for Draco?" Narcissa asked poisonously. "If I'm giving *half* of my sister's inheritance to get that slimy girl, that's supposed to save Draco's life, what will you give up, Lucius Malfoy?"

"I have better things to worry about than your inheritance." Lucius tried to stay calm.

"And how do you plan to do it? I hope you won't have someone else die for your incompetence."

"I'll send an owl to Slughorn telling him I plan to exchange the girl for the book. Like everything else in Hogwarts, it won't remain a secret for long, and whoever helped the Mudblood escape will let them know. Then I can set up a trap and get the book and the one that murdered your sister."

"This time you better be there yourself, instead of sending others."

Narcissa turned before leaving the room. "And if you really get that boy... leave him to me."

sss

When Harry entered the dinning room, the others were already having their breakfast. The incident was obviously known to all, because they looked at him mumbling among themselves.

"What's so special about that book Harry? All that you do is hide in corners and read it." Angelina asked accusingly. Hermione, who was sitting next to her, grabbed her by the hand and whispered "Please don't."

"Don't you 'don't' me! Bloody hell! Nobody treats my friends like that." She glared at Harry.

"You want to know what's in the book? See for yourself!" He threw the book on the table.

Before anyone could say anything, Angelina grabbed the book and tried to open it. For a couple of seconds she was struggling to let it go, shaking like mad and then she flew backwards and hit the wall. McGonagall jumped from her seat.

"Nobody touch that book." She ordered and looked at Angelina to see whether she was all right. Cedric was already there at her side. He turned his head to Harry shouting

"What's wrong with you? You're like *them*!"

"No! He's not! You don't know what he's been through!" Hermione cried.

"You think you know everything. He's not the only one who's lost his family!"

"That's enough!" Sirius barked. "Minerva, could you make sure that Madam Pomfrey checks Angelina over? Harry, I want to have a word with you."

"Harry, you are my godson, and you did save my life, but you can't be like that in here. We trust each other with our lives. We can't fight among ourselves." Sirius was very serious.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I can't resist reading it. I can't help it. All I know is it's important. And that I've got to go on. I've got to!" Harry was getting more and more excited as he was talking about the book.

"There's something else. I've left you alone for more than a week, but sooner or later you'll have to explain how on earth you managed to break the curse and escape from the Malfoys."

Harry didn't say anything. He knew that he better come up with a good explanation, but nothing came to mind. What worried him the most was that Hermione had no clue what to say either. Then suddenly an idea came to him.

"Draco and his friends practiced the Dark Arts on us. Lucius organized private lessons since the Defense Against the Dark Arts is

no longer a subject at Hogwarts. Thus I learnt all the spells. We were cursed to be obedient, but I could understand and remember everything. I don't know what really happened, but Draco did something and unknowingly lifted the curse. Fortunately he was ignorant enough not to realize what he had done. That gave me enough time to pull myself together and start pretending I was still cursed."

"But how did you escape?" Sirius was becoming more and more angry as Harry was telling the story.

"I met Athena. She taught me how to turn into a serpent. That's how I escaped."

"After setting Malfoy's library on fire! That was a good one. By the way, who the hell is Athena?"

"She is the old witch that has lived in her serpent form for the last century or so. She used to be the Headmistress at Hogwarts when professor Dumbledore was still a student. A brilliant student, as she pointed out once."

"Did she give you that book?"

"No, I took it from Lucius' library. He didn't even know what he had there."

"He doesn't have much now, does he?" Sirius sneered spitefully.

"No, he doesn't." Harry laughed. He felt proud of himself for ruining Lucius' collection. He couldn't understand Hermione who was so sad because all those books were destroyed. Better burnt than belong to the Malfoys, that's what Harry thought.

Sirius looked little bit more relaxed. He collapsed into a chair, propping his legs onto the coffee table and lighting a cigarette. "And really, you can't treat your girlfriend like that."

"Angelina isn't my girlfriend!"

"I meant Hermione."

“Hermione? She’s my best *friend*. I don’t even think of her as a girl!”

“I do.”

“You can have her if you *really* like. But if you hurt her, I’ll kill you, and I mean it!”

Sirius smiled.

sss

It was a sunny autumn morning in the Massachusetts. Molly Weasley was sweeping fallen leaves from the lawn. Suddenly, a group of voices standing right behind her yelled “SURPRISE!”

When she turned around, she could see her husband Arthur holding Ron and Ginny in his arms. Molly opened her mouth but couldn’t say anything.

“Mum!” They shouted and ran towards her. They hugged. At last, George broke the happy silence by saying

“Mum, I think you’re choking Ron.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I’m sorry!” Harry tried to convince Hermione.

“But that’s not the point Harry! You’re not yourself anymore. All you do is read that book or sleep! And when you sleep, you don’t have normal dreams! It’s like you’re loosing your mind.”

“You were always reading books. Nobody told you that you were loosing your mind.” Harry snapped.

“See? You’re doing it again! You’ve got to talk to someone! And by the way I do read *books*. *Books* Harry, not one book. The worst crimes in history were committed by people that believed in only one book.”

“You don’t understand Hermione! Once you start reading it, you can’t stop! That book chose me to read it. It’s a part of me now! I’d be lost without it!” Harry said passionately.

“Just listen to yourself! Harry, I’m your friend, no matter what. Please remember that.” Hermione pleaded.

Harry wanted to change the subject. “So, you and Sirius are getting pretty close, eh?”

Hermione bristled. “Nothing you would understand! We are just friends. That’s all. Anyways, mind your own business!”

“Actually, I was minding my own business, before you came in.”

Hermione turned and left the room.

Harry didn’t think of Hermione. He was occupied with events in his dream.

“The last time, I did something extraordinary. The tea set rattled. I could swear they could see me. I know they saw me. If Hermione didn’t wake me up... I must learn how to come back. She must show me how.”

Harry opened the book. As usual only the new content was there. He remembered the first paragraph from the book.

Read me very carefully, because everything you see I will show you only once.

He started reading.

He finished in a minute. There was nothing new except relatively simple instructions how to make a compound that will release smoke when burnt.

Harry was disappointed. “Is that all? Is that all you have to say, after all I’ve done?”

“To say what?” Hermione was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. “Surprised? You didn’t even bother to see whether I’d really gone.”

“What do you know about Black Ergot?” Harry behaved like they’d never had an argument.

“Why do you need that? Harry, it’s very dangerous! Only dark wizards use it!”

“Is there any way to find it here?”

Hermione gave him a stern look, “It’s the book, isn’t it? You read something about it in the book!”

“Of course I did. You don’t expect me to remember that from Herbology lessons, do you?”

“It’s not a herb by the way, but a fungus that lives on plants. Some wizards use Black Ergot for potion making, or burn it and inhale the smoke. But it can be lethal.”

“I bet Snape has it!”

“But he hasn’t been in Hogwarts for a long time. Half-bloods can’t be professors anymore.”

Harry grinned widely. “Good old Snape was sacked, eh? Well, he got what he deserved!”

“If it weren’t for him, I’d never escape from Hogwarts!”

“For who?” Remus was in the doorway.

“Professor Van de Stadt. He was my trickery professor in Salem. That’s how I concealed my wand.”

“And murdered Tonks!” Remus spat bitterly. “The biggest part of her they found was her finger.” He muttered under his breath.

Hermione couldn’t answer. She had promised to tell no one what really happened that day, until the other spy is discovered. Remus

was the last one to be told the truth. She remembered what Tonks said to her:

"I don't know who he or she is. All I know is that they knew what was going on even when I wasn't there. But they didn't know everything, so I believe the spy is not too close to Sirius. That's why they needed me."

After a moment of tense silence, Hermione forced herself to say: "She was a traitor. Everyone here would have done the same."

sss

After dinner, Harry pulled Hermione aside. "We have to talk. In private."

They walked outside. "Hermione, what really happened in Hogwarts?"

"Do we have to talk in the pouring rain?"

"Let's go over there." He pointed to a giant elm. "I know you'd never kill Tonks. What does Snape have to do with anything?"

"Harry, you must promise not to tell this to anyone, especially Remus."

"Ok, I promise."

"Tonks came to the dungeons and gave me my wand. They kept her parents in Azkaban, that's why she worked for them. In that moment Snape came in. He helped us blast the wall. Snape knows everything."

"EVERYTHING!"

"Be quiet. Do you want everyone to hear us? He gave me Veritaserum. Fortunately Lucius Malfoy didn't believe a word and left before I finished."

"Lucius Malfoy?"

“Stop interrupting me! Snape fell from grace because he’s a half-blood. I think he helped me just to spite Lucius and the other pure-bloods.”

“I can’t believe this. Snape would betray *anyone*. What happened to Tonks?”

“I remembered Wormtail’s trick and suggested it. She cut off her finger. She must be considered dead, until we find the other mole. Tonks will use her Metamorphmagus gift to spy on the Ministry, and I’ll pay attention here.”

“And you didn’t find it important enough to tell me!”

“You weren’t yourself! If you had taken your nose out of that book, maybe I would have.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just so important. She’ll help me get Rose back.”

“But how?”

“Do you remember when I saw that snake attack Mr. Weasley in my dream? Well now when I dream, I can see things that I want to see. And I saw Rose. Then you woke me up. That’s why I reacted like that. I hope you understand now.”

“Where did you get the book?” Hermione wasn’t ready to forgive him yet.

“Malfoy’s library.”

“Why did you take that book? How did you know about it?”

“I didn’t. The book wanted me to take it. So I did.”

Hermione shivered. “Let’s go back.”

When they entered the living room, their wet robes were dripping. Hermione noticed that Sirius gave them a strange look. She didn’t know about Harry and Sirius’ conversation that morning. She tried her best to pretend that she didn’t notice it.

CHAPTER 10 – Truth

“Sirius, it’s been more than two weeks since the ambush and more than a week since Hermione’s demonstration. We can’t just sit here doing nothing. I understand that you are cautious after Tonks’ betrayal. We must find out what they know about us, before we take chances. But at least we can prepare ourselves. I can give those kids good Auror training. You know you can find nobody better for that job!”

Moody argued in front of Sirius, Remus and McGonagall.

“You mean to turn them into killers. Do you think I didn’t hear what Cedric said? Others think the same, except Hermione. She’d risk her life even to save a house-elf, Merlin knows why.” Sirius was as stubborn as Moody.

“How do you expect them to practice defense against the Killing Curse if they don’t know how to cast the Killing Curse?” Moody retorted.

“Please gentlemen!” Remus broke in trying to calm them down. “We have to decide what to do next. I agree with Moody about that. We have to be better prepared, as well. I’d like to try that counterspell myself. “

“May I remind you Sirius that you insisted to hear how Hermione blocked the curse. You said it could save many good people’s lives.” McGonagall said.

“So how do you plan to do it? Will everybody try to kill Kreacher?” Sirius asked sarcastically.

“There’s no need for that. We can create images, something like Boggarts and they will be the targets for the Killing Curse.” Moody calmed down. “We’ll keep a safe distance, so no one will be hurt.”

“What else do you plan to teach them?” Sirius asked.

“The combat practice they used to teach cadets at the Auror Academy. We can add some tricks that Death Eaters like to use. You

can see the details and complete schedule here.” Moody sat into a chair and showed them the sheet of parchment he pulled from his robes.

sss

For the next three weeks Moody turned the Headquarters into a training hell as he compressed semesters of teaching into weeks. He made them practice sixteen hours a day just to wake them up after only two hours of sleep by conjuring a cloud of acidic mist. Those that failed to hold their breath and silently cast resistance or free breath spell nearly suffocated. It was a great incentive for all to master silent spell casting.

Moody always left the Killing Curse practice for the late hours when everybody was exhausted.

“The Death Eaters won’t wait for you to take a nap and be fresh and ready. You’ll be exhausted, wounded and frightened. And then you’ll need to do your best to survive!” His voice was dominating.

No surprise that they couldn’t wait for the afternoon when McGonagall showed them some advanced Transfigurations and guidelines to recognize imposters. Unfortunately Moody let her interrupt his classes for only an hour or two and he counted that as a “break”.

Most of them managed to cast the Killing Curse once or twice before collapsing. After a few days Harry managed to evoke the hate at will and he could cast the spell several times before being totally exhausted. By the end of the second week he managed to everyone’s surprise cast it silently targeting any object he wanted. On the other hand Hermione couldn’t cast it not even once.

“There must have been a moment when you hated someone so much that you wanted him or her to die. Even for a moment. You don’t have to feel the hate, just evoke that feeling again.” Moody couldn’t believe that such a talented witch couldn’t get it.

“I can’t! I have never wanted anyone to die!” She tried to convince him.

“Mad-Eye, leave the girl alone. She obviously can’t kill anyone.” Sirius stood in her defense. He was more and more puzzled by Hermione. One moment she was a mature and all grown up know-it-all, and the next just a fragile, insecure girl. She was the celebrity of the Resistance. Everyone wanted to be near her, and he couldn’t find a moment to talk to her alone. It was almost like she was avoiding him. And yet he had the impression that whatever she was doing, she always knew where he was and he could feel her stare on his back, but every time he looked at her, she’d turn away as soon as he caught her eye.

“Don’t worry Hermione, there’re other spells you can use. Why don’t you get some rest?” Sirius smiled at her.

“Rest! I’m the one who says who’s getting rest! And you better find Remus and get some practice yourself or you’ll get rusty!” Moody snapped and turned to the others.

Harry didn’t make any progress in his dreams. No matter whether he slept as a serpent or as a human his dreams were less and less in his control. He thought that perhaps there was nothing significant to dream. The book didn’t show him anything after the paragraph with the recipe. He understood that he wouldn’t learn anything new until he found the Black Ergot. Only he had no idea how and where to find it. He also had no plan how to arrange the exchange. He hoped that as the time passed Lucius would become desperate enough to agree to any deal in order to save his son.

“Moody.” he turned to Mad-Eye during lunch. “I still feel exhausted after casting the Killing Curse, but I don’t feel that unbearable pain I felt that night.” Harry still couldn’t say ‘when I killed Bellatrix.’ Even though he knew it was right thing to do and he didn’t regret it not for a moment, he couldn’t comprehend the fact that he had actually killed someone.

Moody looked at him. “You feel exhausted because of the surge of energy that’s leaving you when you cast the curse. You don’t really need so much of it. Try to practice that. The pain and emptiness comes from the splitting of your soul. Every time we kill someone our soul splits, but by casting the Killing Curse we actually feel life leaving

the victims body. These two combined together make it almost unbearable. It's similar to the effect of the Cruciatus Curse."

"It's quite different but almost that intense, only it doesn't last that long." Harry responded.

Moody stared at him taken by surprise. "You've been under the Cruciatus Curse before, haven't you?"

Harry nodded. He looked at Cedric. He was still haunted by memory of that night when Voldemort raised again and he brought Cedric's dead body to his parents. That was the night when he felt the power of the Cruciatus Curse.

Moody sighed heavily. "Boys like you should think of pranks and girls, not Cruciatus and Killing curses. Will this nightmare ever end?"

Harry managed to smile. "Don't forget Quidditch."

"Yes, how could I?" Moody almost smiled back. Then he stood up. "All right babies. You had enough time to eat. I expect you to be in your positions in one minute!"

sss

After three weeks of everyday practice, Moody agreed to give them all a two days break, and everyone used the first day to relax and recover. It was late afternoon when Harry found Hermione in the library.

"I can't believe you're actually studying!" He said.

"I have to. Everybody can cast the Killing Curse except me!" She was visibly tired and almost desperate.

"Hermione, you don't have to know everything! You're the only one that can block it every time. Everybody here loves you, even Mad-Eye! Don't push yourself. Let's go to the living room. It seems something is going on." He looked through the open door.

When they arrived they saw McGonagall standing with a tall blond girl in her mid twenties by her side.

“Attention please! I’d like to introduce to you Sylvia, our new member. She’ll tell you something about herself.”

Sylvia stepped forward and looked at the room. Most of the audience were people younger than herself.

“My name is Sylvia van Dommelen. I’m from Holland, but I lived in London for years. My fiancé was captured and sent to Azkaban without a trial about six months ago. I tried to find out what happened to him and whether he’s alive and well ever since. It seems that I came too close to something, since I was closely followed, and recently they tried to arrest me too. I managed to escape and I’ve been on the run for the last two weeks. I know that you can’t just trust my story, and I therefore agreed to take Veritaserum. I’ll do it now and everyone can ask me any question except the names and addresses of my or my fiancé’s families. I don’t want them to be involved in this. I hope you’ll understand my appeal.”

After a few seconds of silence nobody objected and McGonagall gave her a vial.

Moody started first.

“Do you work for Voldemort?”

“No.”

“Do you work for a Ministry of this or any other foreign country?”

“No.”

“What is your reason for joining us?”

“I want to re-unite with my fiancé and defeat Voldemort and his Death Eaters.”

“What are your combat skills?”

"I had the basic and advanced Auror training."

"Good enough for me. I'll check your skills tomorrow."

Remus stood up. He looked at her closely.

"Do you love your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"What would you do to save him?"

"I'd die for him."

At those words Remus went pale. Then he continued "We all put our personal feelings aside. In case you have to choose between him and our cause, what would be your choice?"

Sylvia didn't answer obviously struggling to decide.

"What would be your choice?" Remus repeated.

Sylvia started shaking like she was going to have a seizure.

McGonagall interrupted. "I think that would be enough Remus. She apparently can't find the truthful answer. Madam Pomfrey, could you take care of Sylvia before she collapses?"

Madam Pomfrey gave Sylvia a potion and the shaking stopped. She looked awakened and exhausted. They left towards the hospital wing. Harry noticed that Hermione exchanged a look with Sylvia as she walked by them.

sss

"I'm taking you to Hogsmeade." Harry was cheerful the next morning.

Hermione was surprised with his good mood more than with his announcement. "Hogsmeade? What on earth would we do there?" She put the book she was reading on the table in the living room.

"It's such a beautiful morning to spend in the cave. This is a cave, isn't it?" Harry replied, laughing at her bewildered expression.

"It is..." Hermione was waiting for the rest.

"And besides, the nearest fireplace I can use is there." He finally revealed his real intention.

"Are you crazy? You know that the Ministry is monitoring the Floo Network." Hermione shrieked.

"Yes, and you're forgetting how sloppy they have always been. Why do you think anything is different now?"

"But why do you need me?"

"Somebody has to watch my back. You're the only one I can trust."

"You mean, I'm the only one foolish enough to let you do it, and say nothing to Sirius and Mad-Eye."

"Yeah, I mean no. Sort of. But you'll come won't you?"

"I better. Otherwise you'll do it all by yourself, and get caught."

Harry grinned, knowing he had won. "I knew I could count on you."

"What are we going to tell everyone?"

"Nothing. They all think we are a couple. It will be understood that we want to be alone for a while."

"WHAT!"

"Don't worry, Sirius knows we're not. Besides, most of them will be in action. It will keep those fools from the Ministry pretty busy. I guess it's Moody's idea of 'taking a break'."

"Why should I be interested in what Sirius thinks about us? And what do you mean action? Why do they think we shouldn't go with them? Harry, you've already managed to drive me nuts, and it's only 10!"

“You better get ready. I don’t want to miss Malfoy.”

“Lucius Malfoy! You’re going to talk to Lucius Malfoy!”

“Yes, he’s expecting me to. It’d be rude to keep him waiting, eh?”

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but gave up.

Harry stood by the door.

“After you.”

sss

Sam Dickson was bored. There were only a few customers in the Three Broomsticks that morning. He scowled when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror: a chubby, middle-aged wizard with a moustache. His head had no hair on it, because he’d shaved it off since he believed in the phrase ‘women find bald men very sexy.’

A young couple entered the bar. They were somewhere in their early 20’s. As they drew nearer, Sam couldn’t tear his eyes away from the young woman’s chest.

“Is dis ze place you ‘old me about, mon chéri?” the woman asked breathlessly with a heavy accent.

“Yes Yvette- er- darling, this is the place.” The young man turned to Sam. “We’d like a private room, please. The one with the fireplace.” He glanced at the girl out of the corner of his eyes and put a few Galleons on the counter.

Sam looked at the gold in front of him for a moment and took the money. “Yes sir, certainly. This way please.”

Sam showed them the way still staring at the girl. “What does he have that I don’t?” he mumbled.

The young man looked at him, his eyes lingering momentarily on Sam’s baldhead. He resisted the urge to say something and stepped into the room.

“Oh charmant!” exclaimed the woman, waving her hands.

The young man turned to Sam, “We don’t want to be disturbed.”

“Of course sir.”

When he left the room, the girl took out her wand and pointed it at the lock “Colloportus. Now we can have some privacy – er - mon chéri.” Hermione’s voice was no longer breathless.

“Don’t you think you were overacting?” Harry asked.

“And don’t you tell me you didn’t enjoy the jealous looks the bartender gave you!” She laughed. Then she lifted the charm that made her “poitrines” look enormous.

Harry threw the Floo powder into the fireplace sticking his head into the grate. “Malfoy manor, Lucius’ library!”

Hermione got very somber and alert. She checked the windows and the door, and stayed there listening for eavesdroppers while Harry was talking with Lucius.

“What did he say?” She asked when Harry finished.

“He’ll be there with Draco tomorrow evening.”

“Where?”

“At the Hogsmeade graveyard. You’re coming with me as my second.”

“What are we going to tell Sirius?”

“Nothing. We won’t say anything to anybody.”

“But Harry...”

“Are you with me or not?”

“Yes but... Don’t you think...?”

“Hermione, I’ve got to do this my way. I’ve got to in order to get my sister back. Just trust me please; I know what I’m doing. Let’s go back to Headquarters.”

“Alohamora!”

“Hermione, haven’t you forgotten something?” Harry pointed at her chest.

“Oh oui.” Hermione spoke in “French” again and cast the charm.

When they came back into the main room, Sam looked at them in surprise. “Are you leaving already?”

Harry looked him in the eyes. “We’ve never been here, all right?” He reached for his wallet, still looking at Sam.

The bartender suddenly became stiff and stared at them with no expression in his eyes.

Hermione looked at two of them in disbelief. “When did you learn how to hypnotize? Was it in that book?” She whispered glancing at the room to see whether anybody noticed something was going on.

“When did I learn what? What are you talking about?” Harry was just as shocked as she was.

“Harry, you’ve just hypnotized the guy! You must wake him up!”

“What? How?”

“Try telling him to wake up when we leave!” Hermione hissed.

“Sam, you will wake up when we leave the room, and never remember us.” Harry tried to talk in a commanding voice.

“Yes sir.” Sam responded in a monotone.

“How did you do it?” Hermione asked when they left.

“I don’t know. Athena told me that we have a hypnotizing gaze when we’re in our serpent form. I guess that some of that power exists

when I'm human. I don't know how to use it." He answered as they walked away from Hogsmeade.

"We'll find something in the library. It can be handy." Hermione said.

"In that case we better hurry. "

sss

"Only three more days. Three days, Lucius!" Narcissa wasn't angry; she was desperate. "What are we going to do?" Her blue eyes were swollen and red. She was still in her nightrobes. She looked as if she was practically begging Lucius for a solution.

"I'll meet that Potter bastard tomorrow night and exchange the little bitch for the book. This time there mustn't be any mistakes." He paused and added in a stronger voice, as if to reassure himself. "This time there will be no mistakes!"

"What's your plan?"

"I'm going to see the Dark Lord. He'd never forgive me if I do this on my own. Besides, he wants that book back as much as we want our son alive. Nobody can help us better than him. After all, he's the most powerful wizard in the world." He finished with tiding his robes in front of the mirror.

"Lucius!" Narcissa stopped him at the bedroom door.

"Don't worry Narcissa. Maybe I'm not an ideal father and husband, but I'd rather die than let anything happen to my only son." He looked her into eyes.

For a brief moment Lucius leaned forward slightly like he was going to kiss her, but turned and left the room without saying a word.

Hermione couldn't rest that evening. She did promise Harry that she'd help him, but this time he'd gone too far. Meeting Lucius like that seemed like suicide. She knew all too well that Lucius Malfoy couldn't be trusted.

It wasn't that Harry didn't look concerned. On the contrary. He made her practice flying on her broom for several hours. They tried to memorize as much of the Forbidden Forest as possible. Then he showed her the cavern. They explored it for more than hour. They followed the little creek he had heard before. It led to a tunnel that narrowed down, but they managed to squeeze themselves through it and discovered the exit on the opposite side of the hill. They created one portkey for each of them for porting to the cavern in case of an emergency. He made her practice shrinking people on himself to make sure she'd be able to do it the next day if needed.

"There is only one thing you should focus on." She could hear his words ringing in her head. "Only one thing, remember. You must take Rose and get her here or to the Headquarters. Leave the diary to Draco. I'll keep my promise. But remember; you must take Rose no matter what, even if you have to leave me behind. Promise me! Please!" Harry was calm but determined.

Hermione bit her lip as she remembered how she didn't have the heart to refuse him. She did promise, but now she regretted it.

"I have to tell Sirius. We can't just walk into a trap!"

She hesitated, thinking what to do. It was an opportune moment. Harry was sleeping again tightly holding his book, though it looked more like a trance. Sirius was alone in his office and nobody was around. She took a deep breath and slipped unnoticed through the door without knocking.

Hermione found him deeply engulfed reading some letters that lay untidily scattered all over his desk. It didn't seem that he even noticed her presence. Just one look at him and she lost all her confidence and determination. After a couple of seconds of standing and staring at him in silence, she reached the latch. Then, Hermione's heart sunk when unexpectedly he spoke still looking into the letter.

"We were bunch of happy children, back then." He took another letter from the pile. "She was my favorite cousin. I loved her like a sister I never had. Now she's dead. I'll never find out why she hated me so much. Andromeda is dead too, my brother..."

Sirius crumpled the piece of parchment in his hand. He couldn't even say that his brother was dead. Reading the old letters obviously evoked strong feeling and deepened some old wounds.

"...Narcissa" He continued, "is locked in a loveless marriage to that platinum monster that her parents arranged when she was a little girl. Why? Why are the Blacks so cursed?"

He finally looked at Hermione. "And look at me. Just look at me. I'm a lonely wolf, a bitter leader of desperate outlaws that are turning children into soldiers leading them into disaster. "

"No!" Hermione cried, stepping forward.

"You'll never be alone as long as I live!"

Sirius stood up. "Why did you come?"

"I have something to tell you." She said slowly, stepping closer.

"I have something to tell you, too."

Sirius put his hands onto her shoulders. He looked at her for a moment and then saying nothing else he pulled her closer. Their lips met in a passionate kiss. Hermione couldn't breathe. She ran her hands through his hair. Everything disappeared, her fears, Harry, her parents, Voldemort, everything but Sirius. She could feel his hands all over her as he kissed her. She could feel the smell of his skin. He was so strong but again so gentle at the same time. Her whole body was shaking uncontrollably. Every nerve in her tingled. "Oh my god! OH - MY - GOD! " Her knees almost failed her again and she held him tight in order not to fall, still kissing him back with her eyes closed. Sirius took his wand and silently sealed the door. For a moment Hermione thought that it was wrong and that they should stop. The next moment she threw herself into his arms kissing him even more passionately.

sss

Harry was slithering down the well known corridor, following Lucius Malfoy.

“Oh, how predictable he is. At every whistle he runs to his master like a lap dog. Only, Voldemort had only one pet – Bellatrix!”

He moved in just before the door was closed. This time Voldemort was alone.

“Do you have my book? I expected Draco to give it back to me.” He said in open despise.

Lucius bounded. “No my Lord I don’t. But I have plan how to get the book and the one who killed my sister in law.”

“Oh, you do have another plan. How splendid. So you wasted our best mole last time, not to mention Bella. Who are you going to sacrifice this time? Apart from your son of course.” Voldemort was aggressively sarcastic.

Lucius managed to remain calm. “I have Rose Potter. If that bastard is really Harry Potter he’ll do everything to rescue his little sister. He agreed to come with his second tomorrow evening to the Hogsmade graveyard. He believes we will make an exchange.”

“If you used Legilimens to find out what he believes, why didn’t you detain him right away?”

“No my Lord, I didn’t use Legilimens. We negotiated through the fireplace.” Lucius didn’t dare to look Voldemort in his eyes.

“Then how do you know what he believes!” Voldemort raised his hand as he raised his voice.

Lucius trembled. “No my Lord, I don’t know for sure. But we do have his sister. I asked him a couple of questions about her that an imposter couldn’t answer. He really is Harry Potter.”

Voldemort didn’t reply right away. He was walking up and down thinking, like Lucius wasn’t in the room. Several times he stopped for a moment like he was looking for something. Harry would say that once or twice Voldemort was staring not only in his direction, but right into his eyes.

He turned impetuously towards Lucius. "You'll go with Draco as your second, just like you agreed. As soon as you have the book you will notify me through a telepathic bond that I'll make with you. I'll Apparate with a squad of trusted Aurors. Others will secure the area, so there will be no surprises this time. You just give him his little sister and take the book. It should be simple enough even for you."

"Yes my Lord, I will do exactly what you command."

"I'll let you know where and when you'll meet me. And remember, you mustn't tell this plan to anyone, including your wife!" Voldemort dismissed Lucius with a slight wave of his hand.

But it wasn't the last scene Harry would see that night.

sss

Hermione was never a popular girl. As a "late bloomer" she could only watch other girls in secondary school being asked for dates. She could see boys looking at them like they had never looked at Hermione. She tried to persuade herself she didn't care, that it wasn't all that important. But every giggle or whisper behind her back she read as laughter on her account. Only a month earlier if someone like Sirius had looked at her she would have blushed, gone behind the first corner and disappeared. But now, every day could be the last for her or someone else. She couldn't afford to be shy anymore. In the last several weeks she left her home. She was in the battle. She saw people being killed, betrayed. She was almost killed herself, detained, interrogated and rescued. And that very day Harry and she would be in a grave danger in his reckless and desperate attempt to get his sister back.

Hermione looked at Sirius that was still sleeping.

"I can't tell him anymore. He'll never let me go. Not after last night." She touched her lips. It was still hard to believe that all of it had actually happened. "I must go before he wakes up. I have to find Harry and sneak out with him." Out loud she muttered "Well done Hermione. Not only didn't you wait for the 3rd date, but you didn't even wait for the 1st."

She quickly dressed and left the bedroom. Similar to professors in Hogwarts, commanders had an office with bedroom and living room behind. She silently walked to the office and looked around. Hermione recognized many items from Grimmauld Place. Resisting the urge to tidy up the place, she found a piece of parchment on Sirius' desk. She wrote a short note:

I'll be back.

Love you,

H

sss

"It was about time." Harry was waiting in front of the door.

"What do you mean by... How did you know where I was!?" Hermione's face turned purple. "Oh no! You didn't, you..."

Harry enjoyed her embarrassment for couple of seconds. "No, of course not. I only know where you were. I didn't want to intrude, even unnoticed. Don't worry, your secret is safe."

"Really?"

"Honestly Hermione, what do you take me for?" They walked to the dining room. It was very early and they found nobody there. "Let's get out of here before someone comes. I don't want to raise any suspicion."

"I have to get my stuff." Hermione said.

"It's all in here." He showed her his backpack.

"How did you get it from the women's dormitories?"

"I have my cloak, remember?" They went to the kitchen.

"You bastard!"

“Only this time, honestly! What’s wrong with you? Check that I got everything you need and let’s go.” Harry took some food and a box of cookies.

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll go to the cave first. We’ll wait until noon and go to the graveyard and check whether it’s safe.”

They left the Headquarters under the cloak. It was done and sun hadn’t risen yet. After ten minutes of walking they mounted their brooms and flew away.

Mad-Eye Moody stepped from the shadows and looked after them shaking his head.

“Kids. They shouldn’t be in the war in the first place.”

sss

Sirius woke up. Widely grinning, he rolled over in his bed towards Hermione, but she wasn’t there. He jumped from his bed looking into the bathroom and in his office.

“Hermione?” He paused for a second looking confused, “Hermione?” Then he spotted the piece of parchment that Hermione left.

“Where did you go this time Hermione?” He mumbled to himself worriedly. He dressed quickly and hurried from the room.

Sirius bumped into Moody who was on his way to the dormitories. It was quarter to six in the morning, time to wake up his “cadets”.

“Have you seen Harry and Hermione?” Sirius asked, trying to sound casual.

“The lovebirds flew away at dawn.”

“What?” Sirius lost his breath. “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“Why would I? They just wanted to be alone.”

“She was going to tell me something! Something she was going to do with Harry! It must be dangerous; otherwise she wouldn’t have waited until we were alone. And I didn’t listen!”

“No, they’re up to something. We must stop them!” Sirius was anything but casual, by then.

“How do you know... Oh no, not again. Not with Hermione.” Moody looked at him accusingly. “How could you? She’s the same age as my Penelope! You could be her father!”

“Maybe I could, but I don’t want to. Besides, this time it’s different.” Sirius understood that there was no point trying to bluff the old auror.

“If it was Penelope, I’d kill you!” Moody hissed.

“We must find them before it’s too late!” Sirius decided not to tell him about the note.

“You can’t risk taking us out in a broad day light. And judging by their intelligence, you stand no chance finding them.” Moody opposed. “I’ll cancel afternoon practice and personally watch what’s going on in the Forbidden Forest. You can take the morning shift. We don’t need to tell anyone about this, at least for now.”

Yet again, Sirius had to admit that Moody was right. He nodded and left.

sss

After half an hour of flying (“like maniacs” as Hermione remarked), she and Harry arrived at the cave. They had several hours before going to the graveyard. All funerals would be finished by then and there should be only a few people there if at all.

Hermione turned to Harry “So you know what happened last night don’t you?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“And you are OK with that?”

“Yeah sure, why not?” Harry didn’t seem too interested.

“So you don’t mind at all?”

“Hermione, I’m happy for you. I really am. I’m happy that finally something good happened to you since I broke into your life.”

“Oh Harry you do mean it!” She hugged him.

“You know, you do look different today.” He said trying to sound convincing.

“Stop teasing me!”

“I’m not!”

“You are!”

Hermione looked around. “It’s so beautiful! Like emerald green stars shining from the sky of a distant galaxy!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re not going to see stars and flowers wherever we go, are you?”

She paused thinking. “Emerald green... And the Griffin was guarding something...”

She shook her head. “No, it can’t be that simple.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Accio Lia Fail!” Hermione waved her wand.

They heard a cracking sound behind them. When they turned the emerald green stone was floating towards them.

“A box! Give me a box quickly!” She exclaimed.

Harry spilled out the cookies he’d taken from the kitchen and gave her the box.

Hermione took the box in her left hand and laid the stone in it with the wave of her wand.

They looked at each other.

"You know what this means." Hermione eventually broke the silence.

Harry nodded. "Yes, I think I do."

"Are we going to do it?" She asked worriedly.

"Do we want to do it? I mean what is going to happen if we do? Is this world going to disappear all together or only the two of us from it?" Harry asked.

"I don't know!"

"I don't want to leave!" He exclaimed.

"We have to fix this. It's so wrong!"

"What is so wrong Hermione? What is so wrong? Is it wrong that I lived eleven years as a happy kid with my parents? Is that wrong? Is it wrong that you found the love of your life? Is it wrong that I have Rose?"

"So many people suffered and many still do!"

"So in our world!"

"Harry, we've got to do it!"

"Are we going to remember this?"

"I don't know!"

"If we are, how will you live with yourself?"

"Harry you don't understand! It's about your parents!" Hermione bit her lips as she said that.

“What are you talking about? They died when I was eleven!” He was shaking.

Hermione burst into tears.

“Tell me! What do you know about them?”

Hermione looked at him through her tears.

“They are not dead!” She cried. She started sobbing even harder.

“What happened to them? Tell me!” Harry yelled shaking her.

Hermione opened her mouth, but words just couldn’t come out. She hugged him as they kneeled.

“I’m begging you Hermione, tell me!” He was pleading.

“They...” Hermione struggled to catch her breath. She gritted her teeth in an effort to stop crying.

“They were kissed!”

CHAPTER 11 – Who are you?

“NO! It’s not true! Tell me it’s not true!” Harry was desperate. He knew Hermione would never have told him something like that if she hadn’t been certain.

“How do you know that?” He asked.

Hermione managed to calm down a little bit. Keeping that secret from Harry had been eating her and now she felt relieved. She was worried how it would affect him.

“Tonks told me. She thinks that besides her, only Moody suspects what happened to those that fell behind.”

Harry remembered the chill-boned feeling from his first encounter with Dementors. He couldn’t even imagine what it felt like if they had come closer let alone the kiss. And that was exactly what they did to his parents. He knew he had to know what really had happened. This was the second time he was told lies about his parents’ death.

“Tell me everything!”

“Professor Dumbledore wanted to lure Death Eaters into a trap and change the tide of the war. But he didn’t know that Voldemort managed to ward Dementors against the Patronus spell. The spell would only disrupt them shortly. He and a few others stood ground covering the rest of the Order that retreated to nowadays Headquarters. It was when they tried to pull out themselves when your mother fell stunned. Your father went back casting one Patronus after another protecting her, until Death Eaters surrounded them. He lost his wand and then they...” Hermione couldn’t continue. They were silent for some time.

“What happened to the others?” Harry asked in a dry voice.

“Dumbledore ordered them to retreat as he held Death Eaters single handedly for some time until he was surrounded too. But before they could do anything, he simply died. Nobody knows how. Tonks said Voldemort never forgave them for letting him die.”

Hermione laid her hand onto his shoulder.

“Harry, I have to go back and stop you from doing this. We can’t let this happen! Don’t you understand?” She said gently.

“NO! I can’t go back!” Harry stood up. “What if we disappear and everything else remains the same. Draco will die and Lucius will avenge him by killing Rose or doing something even worse. I can’t defeat Voldemort back there. Here, I stand a chance.” He paused shaking his head. “But I can’t stay knowing what had happened to my parents. What am I going to do?”

Hermione didn’t know what to say.

“I’m cursed Hermione! I’m so cursed!”

They fell silent again.

“You found a way how to block the Killing Curse; I’ll find a way to save those that were kissed!” Harry had a glare in his eyes that terrified Hermione. She understood that there was no point arguing with him. Besides he was right, he stood a much better chance against Voldemort in this world.

sss

The Hogsmade graveyard was deserted when they arrived, just like Harry predicted. They walked in under the Cloak and then Apparated back. Everything seemed normal.

“If anything looks suspicious you take Draco first. He’s no match for you, but I don’t want any surprises. I’ll take care of Lucius.” Harry whispered into Hermione’s ear.

“Harry you don’t mean...”

“Don’t worry; I’m not going to kill anyone except if I have to.”

Harry decided to wait in the cave where Sirius used to hide. They had a clear view from there and could see if someone tried to set up an ambush.

As the evening approached fog engulfed the graveyard. They went down slowly covered by the cloak. They stood by a small shrine that a wealthy family raised around their family tomb.

Ten minutes later they heard footsteps and soon they saw two men and a girl crossing the graveyard. Harry's heart started pounding as he resisted the urge to run and take Rose.

When they were about thirty feet away Harry stepped forward leaving Hermione under the cloak.

"Over here Malfoy!" He spoke loudly.

Lucius turned to him. "Where is your second?"

"She's close enough with the book. You want it to save your son, I want my sister back. Lift the curse and let her go, and you'll get what you need!"

Lucius came closer to Harry leaving Draco and Rose behind. Harry tried to make eye contact with him. The only light was coming from the lantern in front of the shrine. Harry could tell that something in Lucius' appearance was wrong. The expression in his eyes was different, but somehow familiar.

"Well, where's my diary?" Lucius asked.

Harry swallowed. He knew who he was confronting.

"Surprised? You didn't really expect to spy on me unnoticed boy, did you?" Lucius started transforming into Voldemort.

Immediately Harry started turning himself into a serpent, keeping eye contact with Voldemort. He was never so focused and determined in his life. For a moment Voldemort was taken by surprise. He had obviously sensed Harry's presence before, but he hadn't actually seen him in his serpent form. He could feel the strength of the hypnotizing gaze coming from the yellow eyes that were burning like fire in front of him. He had to summon all his will power and concentration to resist the gaze.

SSS

Draco came with his father determined to get even with the one that turned his life upside down. Until six weeks before, he had been a happy teenager, celebrity of Hogwarts, entitled to everything best in life: He was rich, famous and attractive to girls. That evening when his father's library was set on fire and his precious Firebolt stolen, his life collapsed and he lived under the threat that it could be over within a few weeks. And there was only one to be blamed for that: Harry Potter.

Draco stood twenty feet away behind him when he saw his "father" turning into the Dark Lord and like that wasn't bad enough, his sworn enemy, Harry Potter, was transforming into a serpent. Bone-chilled by the scene he completely forgot why he was there. The next thing he knew was that he couldn't move. He lost his balance and fell to the ground. All he could see was Rose's feet that shrunk and then suddenly disappeared. Then one hand appeared shortly from the thin air leaving the book close to his petrified body.

SSS

Hermione was still under the Cloak with Rose safely in her pocket. She looked at Harry and Voldemort. They were facing each other motionlessly, hissing something incomprehensible to Hermione at each other.

"Who are you?" Voldemort started first trying to break Harry's concentration.

"I'm the one that will stop you, Tom Riddle!" Harry opened his jaws showing long sharp teeth. Hermione trembled. This was the first time she actually saw Harry as a snake.

"Oh you're showing your teeth boy. Are you going to use them? How far is it? Six feet, seven feet? Can you leap that far? Will you fall short and break the eye contact? Do you feel lucky, boy? Do you?" Voldemort had his wand ready in his hand.

Hermione felt sudden coldness as the worst memories of her life ran through her head.

“Dementors! I have to get out of here!” She knew she was supposed to leave Harry and take Rose, but she couldn't. She had to do something to break the stalemate between Harry and Voldemort. She pointed her wand at the lantern but she was too weak to cast the spell. She tried to Apparate, but it didn't work. She could feel them coming closer and closer as the coldness intensified. Summoning all of the will power that she had left, she managed to mount her broomstick.

Hermione had no idea where to fly, all she knew was she had to stay away from that place and from the Dementors. She held the broomstick with one and the cloak with the other hand, hoping that the darkness, the fog and the cloak would give her enough concealment to escape. She focused on the memory of getting together with Harry in Dr Andersen's office, as one of the happiest in her lives. That was her only chance to avoid attracting the Dementors.

Soon after she left the graveyard, the fog lessened and Hermione could see Hogsmade's lights. She flew at full speed realizing that the Dementors stayed behind her.

“Oh no. They're after Harry. That's why they're not following me!” She had to help him, but she didn't know how. If she went back the Dementors would overpower her, and she did promise she would take care of Rose no matter what.

“Think Hermione! Think! If you go back and Harry already escaped he'd have to come back to your rescue. Stick with the plan!” She sighed heavily. *“Yes, I have to use the Portkey!”*

Hermione looked around. She couldn't see anyone following her. She stopped, took the Portkey and activated it.

It was the hardest decision she'd ever made in her life.

sss

In the meantime Harry was taken by Voldemort's words. It was exactly what he was thinking. If he was only a little bit closer he'd be in a position to leap and sink his fangs into Voldemort's throat. No human could be fast enough to dodge his attack. But if he fell short

he'd be an easy target even for a wizard less powerful than Voldemort. He also realized that it was only a matter of time before the Death Eaters appeared. Maintaining eye contact he started retreating slowly into the shrine. His tail was already in the gap between the marble block and the underground tomb. He knew about the narrow drainage tunnel that led from the tomb to the ditch outside the graveyard.

At lightening speed he disappeared into the tomb before Voldemort was able to realize what had happened. He slid through the tunnel just in time to evade the rubble that fell after Voldemort sent a blast into the tomb. When he arrived at the end of the tunnel the whole area was lit and crawling with Voldemort's Aurors and Dementors.

Surprisingly he wasn't affected by their presence apparently because of his serpent form. He realized he couldn't transform into a human and use the Portkey. On the other hand the evening was chilly and his blood was cooling pretty fast. Harry knew he didn't have too much time before he'd be slower. He decided to slide uphill as fast as possible and try to find a hidden place where he could use the Portkey. Fortunately the graveyard was surrounded with thick bushes and tall grass that gave him a good cover. From time to time he had to change direction or to wait for the Aurors to move away in their search. After a quarter of an hour of making his way through the undergrowth and trees he found a hollow stump about six feet high and four feet wide. He sneaked in and after waiting for half a minute to make sure nobody was coming closer he turned into a human. Harry quickly activated the Portkey.

sss

Hermione was desperate. She was waiting in the cave for ten minutes already, but they seemed like an eternity to her.

"He should have come by now. What happened to him?" She knew what she had to do. She pulled the stone from her pocket. She had to go back and steal Lia Fail from Harry. She set the time for the evening before Harry had shown her the Stone of Destiny. She only hoped she would be able to arrive at Grimmauld Place on time. Hermione closed her eyes.

"Come on Harry. Come on." She hoped that he would appear any moment. She wished she could send a Patronus to Sirius. To tell him what she really felt about him and explain her disappearance. But there was no time for that. She took a deep breath and activated the stone.

It shivered for a second and then burst into dust that disappeared in a sudden draft.

"Oh no! It must be it can't be used more than once by the same person!" She buried her face into her hands in despair. The hope that she could fix everything had been lost.

Finally Harry arrived collapsing to the floor. He was totally exhausted and shaking in fever. His lips were dark blue and both of his eyes went all the way up leaving only white. He held his forehead with both hands twitching in pain.

"The cloak! Throw the cloak over me!" He cried.

Hermione was shocked. She understood he had hypothermia, but she couldn't understand how and the reason for his pain. She never saw someone withering like that. She quickly summoned a heat to warm him up. In a panic attempt to calm him down she hugged him covering them both with the cloak.

Suddenly she couldn't feel her body anymore. Blinding white light lit them. Hermione looked up. Through the gray fog she could see some shadows in the shape of people around them. There was a voice giving commands.

"Search the forest. That witch did something to the girl. I can feel my telepathic bond only faintly. We mustn't lose them. This time we'll break into their hideout! Surround the forest! Let nothing and no one escape!" The shadow came closer to them. She felt overwhelming fear like never in her life. She wanted to get out of there, from that place, from that man. Everything about him was so evil. She started shaking Harry squeezing his throat in panic.

With a bang they appeared in the cave again. She was still holding Harry's throat, as he tried to break away.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Harry said coughing. His skin and lips regained an almost normal colour.

“What was that?” Hermione shouted. “How did you do it?”

“I don’t know. I felt terrible pain. My scar was burning. I knew I was going to collapse. He knows when I’m near him. He can sense me, like I can sense him. Whenever that bond activates I fall into some sort of a dream and come to him. I learnt from the book how to be in control, but this time I was too weak, and he was too strong.” Harry was exhausted and seemed pretty disoriented.

“What was he talking about? It was something about me and your sister!” Hermione gasped as she realized what had happened.

“Harry, he’s using her to find the Headquarters. That’s why nobody followed me. They wanted me to take her there, so they could break in!”

Harry’s face convulsed with anger.

“HE TURNED MY SISTER INTO A WEAPON!”

Harry stood up and lurched. He turned around squeezing his fists. He felt like something was ripping him apart. The mounting pain in his chest became almost unbearable. The hope that he had finally found and saved his sister turned into the worst nightmare of all. The cave was spinning around as the feeling of helplessness overpowered him. Then he yelled:

“DAMN YOU VOLDEMORT! DAMN YOU!”

Harry turned to Hermione.

“Where is she? I want to see her! I want to hug my little Rose!”

“Harry we mustn’t! He’ll find us. You heard him. The bond is weaker when she’s shrunk!” Hermione desperately tried to reason with him. “But, they’ll find us sooner or later if we stay here! And we can’t go to the Headquarters!”

“Where’s my sister!” Harry hissed at her through clenched teeth.

“Harry, you must pull yourself together, or we’ll never save her!” Hermione couldn’t believe she was confronting Harry who was standing in front of her breathing deeply in anger and sorrow.

Before she could do anything, light penetrated through the entrance.

“They’re here.” She whispered. “Let’s go.”

She pulled Harry who followed her mechanically through the passage they found the previous day. The small exit on the other side of the hill was hidden by the bushes. Through the leaves they could see the Death Eaters. Their wands lit the forest.

Harry was looking at them in hate. He said to Hermione.

“Just look at them. All these years in both of my lives they did nothing other than ruin everything that is good. My life. My family. Other families. They think they’re better than the others. That they’re entitled to everything they wish. Everybody that doesn’t give them way and bound must be destroyed.” He paused for a moment. He turned his head away from the exit and said in disgust. “Enough is enough.”

Hermione listened in shock. It wasn’t the Harry she knew. She was suddenly afraid of him almost as much she was afraid of Voldemort.

“There’s only one way to get us out of here alive.” Harry looked her in the eye. Hermione felt like his gaze was taking her mind away. She quickly looked in the other direction.

They could hear voices from the cave. The Death Eaters were obviously searching the place for clues.

“But how?” Hermione asked.

“We’ll fly our way out.”

“We can’t fly through the forest in the middle of the night!”

“You see Hermione; if I could play Quidditch as a serpent I’d win the World Cup every time. And I can see in the dark better than you can in the daylight.”

Hermione swallowed. “You’re not really saying that I’ll fly with you as a snake?”

“Yes Hermione, I mean exactly that. And I’ll need your body to keep me warm. Without that, my blood will cool and I’ll lose control.”

Hermione was aghast. She remembered the scene from the graveyard. She could think of nothing else but the jaws and terrible fangs she saw. She shook her head in denial. The voices from the cave were getting closer. It was only a matter of time before they found the tunnel. She was frantically trying to think of some other way to escape.

“Over here! Over here!” The Death Eaters obviously found the passage.

Hermione finally nodded and stepped forward taking the Firebolt.

“Just don’t look me in the eye. Athena told me I’m half basilisk and half boa constrictor. I don’t know how my gaze will affect you. Once I transform, you mount the Firebolt and I’ll wrap my tail around you. Don’t worry, I’ll hold you tight and won’t let you fall.”

The last thing Hermione worried about was falling. All she knew was that she’d be touched by a snake; it didn’t matter that the snake was her best friend.

Before Hermione could say anything Harry started transforming. She turned her head looking at him out the corner of her eye. A few seconds later she slowly stepped out into the bushes not looking at Harry.

She trembled when she felt the snake’s tail sliding under her robes. Hermione didn’t breathe as she felt the cold muscular body on her skin, sliding up her leg and wrapping around her torso, squeezing and pulling her down to the broomstick. Overpowered by the sensation and weakened, Hermione closed her eyes, trying her best to remain

conscious. She felt they moved slowly. A few branches scratched her face and hands before they left the bushes. Then they surged forward, gaining full speed in a couple of seconds. Harry was right. No man could fly like that and if it wasn't for his tight grip, she'd have fallen that instant.

The Death Eaters were totally taken by surprise. Somebody shouted "The witch! She's flying that way!" pointing his wand towards them. Obviously they couldn't see Harry whose neck and head were practically joined with the broomstick. Harry maneuvered between them and the trees dodging curses. Some of the Death Eaters were on the ground searching around the cave where Voldemort had sensed Rose, while most of them levitated on their broomsticks above the trees making sure that nobody could escape. They were organized in pairs; one shedding the light upon the forest and the other ready to fire a curse.

Whenever Hermione dared to open her eyes she saw the spooky shadows of giant trees running towards her only to be just missed by the sudden swing of the Firebolt. From time to time curses of all colours would fly in their direction or she would hear powerful blasts from behind. It was going on and on, and she lost count and had no idea whether they were flying in circles or moving away from the cave. Every time Harry moved, his snake skin was rubbing against hers. The tip of his tail was flickering nervously in her chest touching her neck. Hermione felt sick. She was lying horizontally on the broomstick hoping that she wouldn't hit a branch and be wiped off the broom.

Suddenly Hermione felt Harry slowing down. She opened her eyes again. They were slowly and silently making their way up floating around the tree limbs. Hermione understood that Harry was up to something and covered herself with the cloak as much as she could from her position. She tied it tight knowing how fast Harry could fly.

sss

Sirius was extremely nervous. He knew that something was going on in the Forbidden Forest and that that something couldn't be good. There was no trace of Harry and Hermione and he blamed himself for that. He underestimated them when he ordered Mad-Eye to leave

them at the Headquarters instead of taking them with the others. Though it wasn't as risky and daring as their earlier actions Sirius couldn't stand the thought of losing any of them. He laughed bitterly at himself thinking that they would have been much safer with Mad-Eye then on their own. Sirius looked around. In the last several weeks whenever he had walked into the living room he had known that one pair of eyes would look at him. Not this time. He felt a strange tightness in his chest. He couldn't bear that she wasn't there. He had to get her back. He had to. Nothing else mattered anymore.

Sirius sent Remus and Bill to find Moody and tell him to come back to the Headquarters. Half ten minutes later Moody appeared with Remus. Bill stayed on watch.

"What the hell is going on out there?" He asked impatiently.

"Voldemort is in the forest with the Death Eaters, Aurors from his ministry and Dementors."

"How many of them?" Sirius asked.

"All. It seems that they've drafted seventh-year students from Hogwarts and the whole professional Quidditch team that visited the school on their way to Glasgow."

"Why? What are they after?"

"I think I have an idea." Sylvia joined them with a few others that moved closer to hear the news.

Everybody looked at her in surprise.

Remus's heartbeat doubled. Ever since he had heard about Tonks' death there hadn't been a single hour in a day that he hadn't thought about her. And thinking about Tonks was more painful than anything else he could imagine. And then Sylvia appeared right out of nowhere. She was everything that Tonks had never been. But somehow he felt confused when near her. There was an attraction that he couldn't explain to himself. He still loved Tonks. Oh yes he did. If dying was the way to be with her again he'd die. Living was more and more unbearable to him. He tried to explain to himself that Sylvia and him

had in common the fact they lost someone they'd die for. That's what she had confessed under Veritaserum. That was exactly what he felt for Tonks. But there was something else. Something he still couldn't understand. Or couldn't admit to himself.

"If you know something you better tell us!" Sirius said.

"Nothing concrete, but while I was trying to find what had happened to my fiancée, I heard some rumors that a slave boy stole an item that belonged to Voldemort from Malfoy's library. Malfoy has fallen from grace since then, especially after Bellatrix Lestrange died in an attempt to retrieve it. That's all I know."

"Why didn't you tell us that?" Sirius asked. The rumor he heard that Rose Potter was in Lucius' custody made much more sense now.

"It was just a rumor, and I had no idea it could be important."

"It doesn't matter now! Hermione is in trouble and we have to help her!" Angelina lost her patience. "And Harry." She added a second later.

"My dear brave child, we're not a match for the force that is out there." McGonagall said sadly.

"But we can't just sit here, doing nothing! Let's strike somewhere else. That will distract them. Let's give Hermione and Harry a better chance!" She wouldn't quit easily.

"Yes, I'm with her!" Cedric stood by Angelina's side.

"Me too!" "Me too!" everybody joined.

Sirius looked at them with pride. "It's time to pay our old friend Slughorn a visit. He might even agree to be our guest."

"What are you up to?" Moody asked.

"Hogwarts must be practically defenseless. You take one squad, and I'll take another one. My squad will break in while you cover us. We'll take as many professors as hostages as we can but the *Headmaster*

is our main goal. Almost every Death Eater has someone in Hogwarts and if they hear it's under attack they'll think of nothing else but to come to their rescue. Good thinking Angelina. Remus, you, Bill and four others will stay here. We can't leave our Headquarters empty. Let's move!"

"Shouldn't you stay and let me go instead?" Remus asked him quietly.

"I've been hiding behind my title long enough. The commander will lead his army again!"

sss

Oliver Wood was levitating on his Firebolt above the Forbidden Forest cursing inside. After a long year spent on the bench, he finally got a chance to play, thanks to their standard Keeper's injury. They didn't lose a single game since then. But the next day's match was the first real test for him, the first derby in his career.

"And what am I doing before the match?" He thought. "Lightening the bloody forest for a stupid Auror that doesn't even know how to mount his broomstick properly! No wonder they couldn't catch a girl on the broomstick! Idiots!"

The forest was quiet for some time and apparently nothing was going on. He hoped they'd call it off soon and he could go to bed and have some rest after a day of training on Hogwarts' pitch. Suddenly he had a feeling that somebody was staring at him from behind. He turned around. All he could see were two yellow eyes in front of his face gazing at him. His blood froze in a moment. The serpent's jaws opened with a hiss. It was ready to deliver the lethal blow when he felt stiff. Oliver couldn't move a muscle and lost his balance. While he was falling through the leaves a terrible pain struck him in the back as he hit a tree limb. The last thing he knew before he lost consciousness was a scream of horror from his partner and the sound of a body falling to the forest floor.

sss

Hermione almost lost her wand when Harry pulled the Firebolt forward and bit the Auror's neck as they flew by him. She couldn't

imagine Harry killing Oliver Wood so she petrified him silently. She only hoped that the branches and leaves would slow his fall. She held her breath as Harry dived at full speed and flew between the trees almost touching the ground. Then he pulled the Firebolt up, just to appear behind another Auror who didn't even scream when Harry bit him too. It was the final straw for Hermione. She fainted.

sss

Rage seized Harry while he was transforming into a serpent. He made sure not to make eye contact with Hermione. When she mounted his Firebolt he made his way under her robes. He could feel her shudder and her heartbeat doubled as his tail touched her skin. Hermione's breath was short and irregular. He understood how horrible this experience was for her. But yet she didn't let out a sound.

"You are such a brave girl Hermione. The best friend and ally anyone could have. Could I ever thank you enough for everything you did and suffered for me? You left everything because of me, and what did you get in return?"

Harry knew all but too well that she wouldn't have fallen for Sirius if there was any chance that she could resist it. She must have been deeply in love with him for quite a while. But yet, she left Sirius just to join him in his reckless and practically impossible mission.

"And look at you now. Instead of your lover, you are hugged by a snake and surrounded by Death Eaters and Dementors. No, you're not my best friend. You're my sister Hermione, as precious to me as Rose, and I swear I'll protect you with my life, as long as I live."

Harry moved slowly until they left the bushes and then flew right between the Death Eaters catching them by surprise. He was already covered by the forest trees when they sent curses after him. He had to maneuver around trees dodging curses and evading blasts. Wherever he flew there were scrolls of them waiting for him on the ground and above the forest. After some time he started becoming tired and it was only a matter of time before he hit a tree or be struck by a curse. Suddenly he noticed some commotion among the Death Eaters and Aurors. He used the confusion to quietly hide in the dense

branches about thirty feet high. He was concealed from those on the ground as well as from those patrolling in the air.

From the voices he heard, he recognized that something had happened in Hogwarts and most of them were rushing in that direction. It was his opportunity for final break through. He decided to stop just running and fight back. As he was making his way up he sensed that Hermione covered herself with the cloak.

"Well done Hermione. You always know what to do."

Through the leaves he saw his former Quidditch captain Oliver Wood. If there was anything he hated more than Death Eaters it was traitors. He rose behind Oliver.

"I can't wait to see your face when you see my fangs, you traitor!"

As Oliver turned he enjoyed his horror for a second before he was going to sink his fangs into his neck. After the fight with the Griffin he knew that poison spreads from neck to brain and heart in a split of a second leaving the victim almost no time to do anything before dying. But that second was enough for Hermione to petrify Oliver. Harry didn't wait for a moment but leaped forward and bit Oliver's partner as he flew by him. Remaining Death Eaters and Quidditch players rushed towards them. Harry laughed inside. They were no match for Nemesis. That's how he called himself in serpent form. After performing the most spectacular Wronski Feint, he flew upwards biting one Auror on his way up and another on his way down to the woods. His body was wrapped around the broomstick and his long neck was wiping right and left delivering venom to his victims. Then he realized that there was nobody between him and the forest. He flew forward at full speed leaving the cave behind. This time no one sent curses after Hermione and him.

Harry changed direction every few seconds trying to see whether he was followed when he realized that Hermione was twitching in his grip. She was raving in obvious fear. He looked around and realized they were being intercepted by two groups of Dementors coming from both sides. Squeezing her tighter to the broomstick Harry surged up. He hoped that they wouldn't be able to follow him too high at his speed. Over an hour and a half of chasing in the Forbidden forest

took its toll and he was near to the breaking point. He knew he wouldn't be able to endure another zigzag chase. On top of that he had to hold Hermione's nearly lifeless body on the Firebolt. He flew higher and higher. The Firebolt was slowing down as they soared steeper. The half of the Dementors followed them steadily upwards while the rest spread down below waiting for the outcome. As he was slowing down the Dementors were closing the distance. Harry turned to Hermione that was half-conscious, and looked her into eye.

"You are not afraid of them! You are invincible!" He was repeating this inside hoping that the gaze will transmit the message. The Dementors moved closer.

Finally Hermione electrified. She pulled her wand from the sleeve and summoned the silvery dog that looked like a Grim. The confusion it made was enough for Harry to level his Firebolt and pass the Dementors. Once they were behind Harry, Dementors stood no chance catching him.

Harry flew next half an hour to the West until he reached the sea shore. He landed on the small isolated beach under the cliff. He slowly released Hermione and transformed back into human. He had irresistible urge to fall to sleep.

"Are you all right?" He asked her.

Hermione nodded looking to the ground.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? You ask me what's wrong!" She shrieked. "You touched my... And you were a snake. We almost got killed. You murdered those people in cold blood. You hypnotized me. I have your sister shrunk and petrified in my pocket. All of the Death Eaters and Dementors are after us. We have nowhere to go, and you ask me what's wrong!" She started crying hysterically. Everything came to her like an avalanche.

Harry couldn't find the right words. He was too occupied by events and needed some time to comprehend everything that happened that

day and evening. Still feeling dizzy he managed to cast the cockpit spell.

"Are you able to restore Rose? We've got to go."

Hermione nodded obviously trying to pull herself together. She carefully took the little girl from her pocket.

"Finite incartium!"

For the first time in six years Rose appeared in front of Harry. The faint light from Hermione's wand lit her expressionless face. Rose was pale and skinny. Her hair was messy and she was dressed in rags. Harry broke into tears hugging her.

"Oh Rose! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" He was repeating that on and on sobbing like a little child.

"Harry, we can't stay here." Hermione finally spoke.

Harry looked at her still holding Rose. "Yes I know."

"But where can we go?"

"To Dublin." Harry was gently tidying Rose's hair.

"Dublin?"

"The Weasleys told me about a guy there. He can send us by smugglers Floo network to America. We have to find him. He'll help us to go to Massachusetts. Weasleys will know how to help Rose." Harry looked down. "I'll get you out of this mess if it's the last thing I do. Thank you for being by my side Hermione. I don't know why I deserved it."

Hermione bit her lips. She couldn't answer herself why she followed him in spite of everything. She thought of Sirius. What was he doing? Was he safe? Worried? Sure he was worried, but for what reason. She wanted him to be worried for the right reason.

They took their seats in the Firebolt's cockpit. Hermione held the motionless Rose in the back.

"Don't let me fall asleep. Do whatever you need to do, but don't let me fall asleep."

"Do you know how to get to Dublin?"

"According to the Weasleys I should fly ten minutes to the west and then turn south. We should be there by midnight or so."

sss

"You'll pay for this Sirius! Don't you think you'll get away with this!" Slughorn was furious. He was standing in front of Sirius, Remus and McGonagall. Sirius was in a very bad mood. Mad-Eye's squad had set up an ambush for the Death Eaters that ran to the rescue and demonstrated their newly acquired skills by barraging their enemies with the Killing curses before they withdrew. Nobody kept count but there must have been at least half a dozen Death Eaters lying on the battlefield. Of course Moody flatly explained that it had been the best way to cover the squad that had been inside the Hogwarts. They captured the Headmaster and two members of staff, Mulciber and Nott. They also took potions supplies and classified documents from the Headmaster's office.

Sirius stood up and gripped Slughorn's throat. "No *Headmaster!*" He said through clenched teeth. "You're the one who'll pay for all the crimes you did. For all the people you betrayed!"

He knew that after their action, Hogwarts must be closed for the school year. Normally it would be a great success. But he didn't, like everybody else in the Headquarters, feel like celebrating. They were all worried about Hermione and Harry. Nobody knew what had happened to them. If they had escaped they would have come to the Headquarters. But they didn't. If they had been captured the Death Eaters would have stopped looking for them. But they didn't. Moody and Bill were still out in the forest trying to find out what was going on.

sss

The Firebolt was cruising over the northern Atlantic. Harry struggled not to fall asleep. With the cockpit spell, Hermione could easily handle the Firebolt, but he didn't want to face Voldemort in his dreams again. Not that night. Suddenly Rose erected on her seat.

"You think that you've won, don't you?" She spoke in Voldemort's voice. "Your precious little sister is so attached to me that she can't live without our little bond. Take her out of my reach and she'll die. Oh no, not just yet. You'll be watching her life fading slowly in your arms. You fool!"

Rose collapsed back into her seat. Hermione probed her pulse.

"She's alive! But her pulse is getting weaker!"

Harry looked at his sister frozen in terror. How could he think it would be that easy?

"There's got to be a cure. There's got to be! Mr. Weasley will know someone who can help her. Hold on Rose. Just hold on."

He looked desperately ahead through the darkness. His Firebolt was flying at full speed already. There was nothing he could do but hope he was on the right course. Hope he wouldn't be too late.

sss

Back in the Forbidden Forest Crouch stood in front of Voldemort.

"Well then, where are they?" Voldemort asked.

Not looking his lord in the eye Crouch responded hesitatingly "They are not in the Forbidden Forest, My Lord."

"What do you mean by that? Who let them escape? Bring them here immediately!"

"It's not possible my Lord. They're all dead except for one from the Quidditch team. He's on his way to the hospital with a broken back."

"Who left those kids alone? Where were the others?"

“When they heard that Hogwarts was under attack they rushed to their rescue. The blood traitors were waiting for them in ambush. This time they aimed to kill.”

“ENOUGH! I don’t want to hear any of this! I’m surrounded by incompetent fools! LEAVE! Everybody leave!”

Voldemort dismissed everyone and Apparated home. He looked at the book that Draco escorted by his mother had given him. It was Tom Riddle’s diary. His diary. He opened it. On the first page of his lifeless journal was a sign in the shape of a lightening bolt he had once seen in Lucius’ library. He stared at it in anger and disbelief. Letting the book fall from his hand he squeezed his fist and let a cry out.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

CHAPTER 12 - Running Out of Time

Hermione was holding Rose at the backseat of Harry's Firebolt.

"How is she?" Harry asked. Hermione lost count of how many times he'd repeated that question. And every time she gave him the same answer.

"I don't know Harry. The same; it seems like she's sleeping."

One thought was running through her mind for quite a while. Finally she spoke.

"Harry, you gave away the only Horcrux you knew about!"

"No I didn't!"

"But I left it to Draco like you told me."

"Yes. Draco took the vow to bring the book back. He never promised to bring the Horcrux. You gave him the book, that's all that he needs."

"But I don't understand. Why are you so concerned about Draco Malfoy? And what do you mean by 'he never promised to bring the Horcrux back'?"

"You see Hermione, while we practiced the Killing Curse I learnt to target anything - including objects. Well, it takes the life out of a body, why wouldn't it destroy the life stored in a Horcrux?"

"So you cast the Killing Curse on the diary! That's... That's brilliant!"

"Yes, Nemesis has some great ideas when he's in the right mood."

"Nemesis?"

"That's who I am when I transform into a snake."

"Nemesis was the god of justice and vengeance in ancient Greece! Harry you don't think you're a god do you?"

"Of course not. I like the name though. I like to think I can bring justice and avenge the innocent."

"Harry, justice and vengeance aren't the same thing!"

"Yes I know. That's why we have a different word for each." For a couple of minutes Harry forgot about the horrible threat he had heard an hour ago.

"Look Hermione, lights. It must be Belfast! We'll follow the coastline to the south until we reach Dublin!"

"Do you know where to go?"

"Yes. To the Dragon's Lair pub in CapelStreetThe owner, Ryan Curran isn't afraid of Voldemort and has a healthy appetite for gold. He'll help us for a price."

"But your gold is in Gringott's Bank!"

"Not all of it. My parents, like the others from the Order, moved the most of their money to the Headquarters. Sirius gave me access to my parents' gold and I took a substantial amount. It should be more than enough. We might need some of it in Massachusetts. The problem is that I have no idea how to get to CapelStreet or how to find the pub."

"I've been in Dublin several times with my father. Capel Street is right across the Dublin Castle and City Hall. It shouldn't be too hard to find it."

It was past midnight when they saw the lights of Dublin. Harry slowed down as Hermione tried to figure out which way to go.

"There, follow the river. When we see City Hall on the left, turn right. And remember, we mustn't be seen."

Harry slowly landed in a small park. Drizzle and cold wind welcomed them to Dublin. Harry and Hermione took Rose between them and walked to Capel Street. Hermione gave Rose her cloak trying to cover her rags.

The street was deserted. They could see a Muggle pub across the street.

“What are we going to do now?” Hermione asked.

“Let’s go in there.”

Without waiting for an answer Harry stepped forward.

The pub was full and noisy. Nobody seemed to notice that they were there. Harry left Hermione and Rose by the door and went to the bar. He cleared his throat noisily. The bartender glanced at him.

“I’d like to see Ryan Curran.” He said.

The bartender looked at him and laughed. “You’d like to, wouldn’t ya?”

Harry became nervous. The last thing he wanted was to attract attention. He tried to remain calm.

“So you do know him don’t you?” He asked narrowing his eyes.

The bartender wasn’t impressed with his attitude. “And who’s asking?”

“He doesn’t know me, but I have some important business with him.”

“Business? At this hour? Listen to me laddie, I don’t know what ya’re up to, but it’s not going to happen in my pub. There’re hundreds of pubs in Dublin. Go and try your tricks somewhere else!”

Harry realised he was wasting his time. He turned and left followed by Hermione and Rose.

“This isn’t the place!” He hissed outside.

“Are you looking for a guide, young man?” A squeaky voice belonged to an old man that appeared behind them. He was short and dressed in robes. They could smell whisky breath as he spoke. Harry exchanged a look with Hermione.

“We’re looking for Dragon’s Head pub.” He said cautiously.

“Oh, but you’ve just missed it!” The old man pointed at the door they had stepped from a minute ago.

“How...”

“Allow me to show you.” He walked to the door and then turned right and disappeared in the doorway. Harry went after him followed by Hermione and Rose. As they stepped through the doorway it suddenly widened into a double-door and they found themselves in a place that reminded them of the Leaky Cauldron.

“Thank you sir. May I buy you a drink?” Harry asked.

“A drink.” The old man grinned widely, “Oh by all means. A man needs a drink in weather like this.”

They sat at the bar. The bartender gave the old man a drink without waiting for an order.

“Oh my name is Adams. Noel Adams. But everybody calls me Noel.” The old man introduced himself sipping his drink.

“Nice to meet you Noel. I’m Harry.” Harry ordered Butterbeers for him and Hermione. Rose was getting weaker and was still upright only because Hermione held her by her arm.

“Listen Noel. I have to talk to Ryan Curran, urgently. It’s very important.”

Noel hesitated looking at the bottles on the shelf. Harry put a Galleon on the bar.

“That should be enough for quite a few drinks, shouldn’t it Kynoch!” Noel said to bartender.

Kynoch poured another drink into Noel’s glass.

“Ryan. Oh yes, of course I know him. He owns this place.” Noel bottomed the glass. Then he looked around. “He must be in his office. I’ll show you the way.”

Ryan’s office was dark. The only light was coming from the lamp on his desk. Ryan had black gelled-back hair and an arrogant, antagonizing look. His face with no smile was dominated by his black deeply-sunk eyes. He was sitting surrounded by a cloud of smoke with a thick cigar in his mouth and a ponderous expression on his face. He held a large half-full whiskey glass in his left hand. The central place on his messy desk was occupied with a massive ashtray full of ash and cigar butts and a bottle of Muggle-made Irish whiskey.

He looked at the party that stood in the doorway.

“Not now Noel. I’m busy. Besides, I’ve told you that you must pay in advance for your drink.”

“No Ryan, it’s not that. This kind gentleman has to talk to you urgently.” Noel stepped into the office.

“I’ve said I’m busy.”

Harry didn’t want to give up. He followed Noel into the office.

“Mr Curran, I’m so sorry to interrupt you like this, but my sister is dying. I’ve got to get to Massachusetts tonight!”

Ryan looked at them carefully.

“So you are the infamous Harry Potter aren’t you? There is a warrant for your arrest. Let me see: six accounts of murder, one attempted murder, arson, breaking and entering yadi yada. And you must be Miss Hermione Granger, two murders and the obstruction of justice. Congratulations! What a nice pair!”

Harry could feel tension rising in Ryan’s voice. Three people he didn’t notice by then jumped from their chairs.

“You!” Draco Malfoy glared daggers at Harry.

“Narcissa, you better calm your son, or you’ll never get to Finland.” Harry recognized Snape’s voice coming from the shadows.

Narcissa and Draco on one side of the room and Harry and Hermione on the other held their wands ready to cast spells.

“Of all the pubs in Dublin, you had to meet in mine!” Ryan roared. “Don’t you know that the pub is full of Voldemort’s spies? Should I remind you that you are all fugitives? Put your wands away, NOW!”

The parties slowly lowered their wands and put them in their robes.

“Do we have to be in the same room with this scum?” Narcissa asked arrogantly looking at Harry’s party.

“You see Hermione, the only world they can accept is the one where they are masters and all others are slaves,” he paused looking at Snape, “or *servants!*”

“Harry stop it! This is not the time or place.” Hermione hissed angrily.

“Thank you Miss Granger, I’m glad to see you’re more reasonable than your boyfriend.” Snape sneered.

“Harry’s not my boyfriend!” Hermione snapped.

“Oh, then someone else is, isn’t he? Oh no, you didn’t fall for our famous ‘Prince charming’ did you? How disappointing Miss Granger. I expected you would do better than that.” Snape continued.

“If I didn’t know better I’d say *you* felt for that slimy Mudblood, Severus!” Narcissa said.

At that moment Rose felt to the floor.

Harry took her in his arms. She was so light he had no problem lifting her. He turned to Ryan.

“This is my little sister Rose. She and I were slaves in houses of people like them. We aren’t criminals. We just want to live in peace.

Please help us. I have gold. Don't you see she's dying? She needs a healer and we can't go to a hospital." Harry was pleading.

Ryan looked at him silently for a few seconds.

"I know who you are. I knew your parents, too. But it isn't my war. Besides, all connections are broken and I can't help you even if I want to. All I can do is to let you go and tell no one you were here. Noel, show them the back door and make sure nobody sees you. Good night Mr Potter."

"It will be your war sooner than you think. Voldemort won't stop. He'll come here as well, unless someone stops him." Hermione confronted Ryan.

"There's no point arguing miss." Noel told her. "Ryan is the most stubborn man in all of Ireland. I knew him since he was a little boy. I'll take you to someone who might help." He looked at Ryan. "If you don't mind."

Ryan gave him a look and poured another glass of whiskey.

sss

When they went outside the drizzle had already turned into a rain. They followed Noel through narrow streets with little light. Hermione thought that Muggles never saw this side of Dublin. Not in their century anyways. After forty minutes of zigzagging and making sure they were not followed Noel told them to wait and went downstairs to a basement door. He knocked in some sort of code. After a while the small door opened and light fell on Noel.

"Noel, what brings you here in this hour? Don't just stand there, come in." They heard a voice from inside.

"I have some people here desperately needing your help, Sha." Noel pointed at Harry Hermione and Rose. "The girl is very sick."

"Well she shouldn't be waiting in the rain then. Tell them to come in."

They walked down the stairs and went into a something that Hermione would describe as a medieval alchemist lab. They walked between shelves full of vials, flasks, bottles and jars of all shapes filled with substances of all colours. The central part of the room was occupied by a large desk with glass tubes and spirals that were releasing stinky fog that changed from greenish to pink. On the walls and from the roof were hanging parts of animals and some items they couldn't recognize.

"This is my cousin Patricia McKenzie. These are Hermione Granger, Harry Potter and his sister Rose. She's the one that needs your help."

"I'm not blind Noel. Please bring her in here." Patricia showed them a small door in the back.

"This is my surgery. And please call me Sha."

The room was indeed equipped with beds and most of the items one would find in a respectable healer's surgery.

Harry laid Rose on the bed. She was motionless and barely breathing.

Patricia took the plumb-line with golden plummet and let it hang over Rose's body. From time to time it swung as she moved it slowly from Rose's head to her abdomen.

"What had happened to her?" Patricia asked. "I can sense very powerful magic, but my vision is blurred because she appears to be under several curses."

"She is." Harry nodded. "She was enslaved six years ago. I tried to rescue her, only to find out that Voldemort made some sort of bond with her that will make her die if she's taken too far away from him. That's all we know."

"The Dark Lord!" Patricia gasped.

"Can you help her?"

"I can prepare a potion that will lift the Enslavement Curse. But it mustn't be used until the telepathic bond is broken, otherwise she'll

become permanently insane. He used very powerful magic. Very powerful. It's beyond my knowledge."

"Isn't there anything you can do? We can't go to someone else. We're running out of time!" Harry was desperate.

"I could make a potion that will hibernate her. It will slow every process and give you some time to find a cure. Only it's risky."

"How risky?"

"She may not wake up."

"What if we do nothing?"

"She'll die in twelve hours."

"Let's do it! Give her the potion."

"I don't have it. It's a very complex and unstable potion. I have to make it for you. Only there is one problem."

"What is it?"

"The recipe requires a very rare ingredient. Basilisk's venom. I'm afraid we can't get it on time."

"Do you know how to take it from a Basilisk's tooth?"

"Yes, but where will I find a Basilisk who'll let me take the venom?"

"That shouldn't be a problem."

Harry started transforming. In a different situation he would have enjoyed the expression on Noel's face. However he was too worried. Being only half Basilisk meant that Patricia wouldn't know for sure how much venom to use.

"Extraordinary! How Extraordinary!" Patricia was delighted.

She quickly took a vial and an instrument that looked like pair of pincers. Harry didn't like the feeling of steel against his fangs but he remained motionless.

"All right. I have what I need now. It'll take about two hours to make the potion. You two look exhausted. Why don't you take a nap?"

Harry was human again. He knew he was too weak to face Voldemort.

"Can you make me not to dream?"

"I have a potion."

"Potions don't work."

Patricia opened the chest that was behind her desk.

"This is a dream-catcher. I got it from a medicine man I met in Alaska. When you want to dream, put it away, when you don't, put it close to your head. It's powerful magic I know little about. They don't cast spells like us you know. They pray to spirits to make magic for them, when it's needed. He prayed to the spirits to make this dream-catcher and it's yours now."

"I... I... Thank you." Harry understood that offering gold wasn't appropriate. He collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep before laying his head on the pillow.

sss

Harry opened his eyes. It took a few seconds to remember where he was. The sun was shining through the small window above him. He jumped. It was late morning which meant he had slept seven or eight hours. He looked around. Nobody was in the room. He rushed through the door.

Patricia and Hermione were whispering around a tube filled with yellowish liquid releasing smoke, deeply involved in a discussion. Harry cleared his throat.

“Oh, good morning Harry. Did you sleep well?” Patricia greeted him. “You must be hungry. Why don’t you have some breakfast while we finish this?”

“Where’s Rose? How is she?”

“Oh don’t you worry dear. She’s fine for now. The potion worked better than I expected. I never worked with venom that was so fresh. It does make a difference.”

“I must see her! Where is she?”

“All right, all right. But mind you that the potion takes one day to have full effect. You mustn’t touch her!”

Patricia led Harry to the backroom. Rose was motionlessly lying on the bed with her eyes closed. She wore new white robes. Her hair was clean and tidy. Harry looked at her in silence. She was so beautiful. He wondered whether they’ll ever really reunite. Everything seemed so hopeless.

“We better go now.” Patricia whispered to his ear.

Harry looked at his sister once more and left the room.

They found Noel and Hermione in the kitchen having breakfast. The smell of toast and bacon filled the room. Harry suddenly realized he didn’t eat for more than a day. He sat at the table.

“Noel, do you have any idea how we can get to Massachusetts?” He asked while toasting another piece of bread.

“You’ll fly.”

“I can’t fly over the Atlantic on my broom.”

“No, of course not. You’ll fly in a plane, with Muggles.”

“What?” Harry and Hermione shouted in unison.

“You see Ryan didn’t lie when he said that the Floo network was broken. It didn’t mean that he wouldn’t find another way.”

“But neither of us has a Muggle passport!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Well he’s a wizard, isn’t he?” Noel smiled. “Ryan knows all the tricks. He’ll bribe your way out.”

Noel leaned forward. “He needs two hundred Galleons to get your ticket and passport ready. You better stay here; I’ll take care of that.”

Harry hesitated. It was almost everything he had with him.

“Don’t you worry laddie. If I wanted the money for myself I’d tell them your whereabouts.”

He pulled two pieces of parchment. One had Harry’s photo and promised five thousand Galleons reward for information that led to his arrest and the other one had Hermione’s photo with reward of two thousand Galleons.

“You two worth more than if you were made of gold.” Noel laughed loudly.

Harry counted the gold still shocked with reward posters.

“See you later!” Noel disappeared followed by Patricia.

“Sha, how much I owe you?” Harry asked when she went back.

“Owe me? But I have vial full of Basilisk’s venom! It’s like a liquid diamond! Let me have another one and you’ll have one thousand Galleons waiting for you next time you come. You will come again won’t you? Both of you.”

“Of course we will. As soon as we take care of Rose.”

sss

It was late afternoon when Noel came back with a small suitcase and some Muggle clothes for Hermione. He grinned at them.

“Here is your passport and ticket to Boston, miss. You’ll need some clothes as well.”

“What about Harry and Rose?”

“You’ll take them in here.” Noel pointed to the suitcase. It looked like an ordinary suitcase that people take with them to the passenger cabin. But when he opened it, its inside was as big as a small room.

“You see, Muggles can never find you there and you’ll be safe and comfortable. There is one bed and a chair inside. You can try it if you like.”

Harry stepped in. As soon as he set his foot into the suitcase he appeared in a small room, seeing Noel and Hermione looking at him from the opening above his head. He tried to reach the exit with his hand and he appeared outside.

“This is so...” Harry muttered

“Magical?” Patricia laughed.

“When’s our flight?” Hermione asked.

“Tomorrow morning at quarter past seven. You have to sign in at no later than six.” Noel answered.

“You mean to check in?” Hermione smiled. It was always amusing how much wizards got confused with Muggle technology.

“Yes, check in, register, whatever. Bloody Muggles! Sorry miss.” He smiled at her confused.

“No worries. I was confused myself with wizardry in the beginning.” Hermione responded casually. “Tell me; what made Ryan change his mind?”

“Nothing. He didn’t want the Malfoys to know he was helping you.”

“What happened to them?” Harry asked.

“They are off to Iceland.” Noel was looking at bottles on the shelf. Patricia had left shortly to get some ingredients for her potions and he was obviously trying to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Iceland!" Harry exclaimed, "I thought they were going to Finland. Narcissa has relations there from her mother's side."

"That's what they thought, too. Though Ryan warned them that the Floo network was unstable and mishap could easily happen. It seemed they were too terrified to wait for more favourable conditions."

"So what will happen when they realise they are in Iceland?"

"For some reason, I believe that they will arrive without clothes and any of their personal belongings including gold and jewellery." Noel finally found a bottle of Firewhisky hidden behind some dusty jars. He grinned triumphantly and continued. "Fortunately for them, there is an expedition for Greenland there, looking for volunteers willing to join. Hopefully they'll be told in advance that they'll stay there in a survival mission for the whole year. It will be quite tough being there for twelve months without wands."

"Without wands!"

"Yeah. It wouldn't be really survival with wands would it? Besides they might have lost theirs in a mishap already."

Something in his voice told Harry and Hermione that the Malfoys *will* have a mishap and *will* arrive to Iceland with no clothes and no personal belongings.

"Harry, you never told me why you were so determined to save Draco?" Hermione asked.

"I promised Athena. She told me that Draco had to make the Unbreakable Vow to Voldemort that he would bring him the diary in six weeks. She couldn't let the last of the Malfoys to die, so she asked me to save him by returning the diary. Athena saved my life and helped me escape from Malfoy manor. I couldn't refuse her plea. Otherwise I wouldn't have given a whit for that brat." Harry replied.

"That Ryan bloke is so mysterious. Who is he really?" Hermione asked Noel, who was in the kitchen looking for something.

“Ah, finally a proper glass. One can’t drink liquor like this from any glass, you know. Oh yes, Ryan. He doesn’t like it when people talk about him.”

“Come on Noel, we’re not just any people. We owe him. We won’t tell anyone.” Hermione was persistent.

“Oh well, I guess it should be all right. Harry’s Sirius’ godson after all.” Noel lowered his voice, “Ryan’s father is from an old pure blood family whose lineage goes all the way back to the first kings of Ireland. If they ever find the Stone of Destiny, I wouldn’t be surprised if he becomes our new king.” Noel enjoyed his drink while talking.

“But how come he’s running a pub?” Hermione asked quickly hoping that Harry wouldn’t mention Lia Fail.

“Yes, that’s what he does, doesn’t he? His mother was a Muggle, but not any Muggle. She was a Gypsy. Her family used to travel with a circus as fortune tellers and magicians. The only thing that pure bloods hate more than Muggles, is Muggles that ridicule magic. However, when his mother and father met, it was what people call ‘love at the first sight’. They ran away the next morning. It was like a fairy tale for her until his gold dried out. Then one day when she came back from the bakery he wasn’t there anymore. He never knew she was pregnant. A few weeks later he died in a stupid bet. Riding a dragon without a wand! How drunk one must be to try doing something like that, eh? Her family didn’t want her back, so she left for America. Ryan and she lived there until I found them. He was my nephew after all. My family disowned me for that, so I stayed there teaching him Magic. You see, no wizarding school wanted him. His mother died when he was twelve, from a broken heart, I believe. I told him not to come back to Ireland, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“You’re his uncle and he treated you like that in the pub! How could he after all you’ve done for him?” Hermione exclaimed.

“Oh that.” Noel laughed sipping his drink. “He has a funny idea that a man can drink too much. Ha! How ridiculous! He wants me to drink less, so his bartenders don’t give me a drink unless I pay in advance. But I love him no matter how foolish he is!”

They heard steps outside. Noel quickly put the bottle back before the door opened.

"It wasn't easy to find Black Ergot at this time of the year." Patricia said walking into the kitchen. "You must be very careful with that Harry, or it can be lethal. Hermione, this is the recipe and ingredients for the potion that could help him if something goes wrong. But mind you both, it doesn't always help. It'd be the best if you keep an eye on him when he's using it, but be careful not to inhale the smoke yourself."

Hermione took the small leather bag from Patricia.

"And don't thank me! Voldemort never chased someone like he's chasing you, ever since Dumbledore died. If you are such a threat to him, I'm honoured to help you." Patricia sat at the table and laid her hand on Harry's.

"Harry, if you're going to use that recipe of yours I want to watch over you. Just tell me when you're ready, will you? I have no idea where you found it. Not in any of books that I know of, that's for certain."

sss

As the stinky smoke surrounded him Harry fell into asleep. His body became numb and then he felt he departed from it.

Flash! Blinding light surrounded him for split of a second, only to be replaced with darkness as painful as the light. He could feel every inch of his body in pain. Unbearable, breathtaking pain. His muscles felt like falling off his bones, his skin felt like it was snapping, and his eyes were pierced by thousands of needles. Harry touched the stone wall behind him. It was cold and rough, covered with some dense and sticky stuff. The air was humid, stale and smelt like rotten meat. He heard some people moaning and crying in pain. Harry moved slowly holding the wall with both hands in terrible fear that he could be lost if he left the wall. As his eyes accustomed to the darkness he started recognizing the shapes around him in a low, glooming light that was radiating from the walls. Lying on the floor were bodies; only they looked more like living skeletons. Swarms of rats were running across the floor and over the bodies of unfortunate souls that made fruitless

effort trying to shoo them away. Harry saw a passage that led out of the chamber he was in. Slowly as the pain was ripping him apart with every move, he went towards the passage avoiding people that were lying down and rats. He fell and stood up and fell again onto a lying creature. The poor devil let a weak groan out. From close range Harry looked at what was left of the man's face, crawling with worms. He jumped horrified stepping on another body and fell again. He crawled the rest of his way out and stood up. As he stepped into the passage the light disappeared completely. He continued having in mind nothing else but to leave that place, moans and cries, to breathe fresh air.

"Air!"

He felt a breeze coming from the passage. Harry made another effort and walked down the tunnel. Suddenly his foot didn't step on floor and he stumbled across the edge. Harry was falling and falling for what seemed like an eternity to him, holding his breath in horror. Then he hit the floor. The pain was gone.

"Am I dead?"

Harry didn't dare open his eyes. He cautiously moved his hand, then the other one. Everything was fine. He opened his eyes. He was lying on a bed in a room with white walls. On his right was a desk and a man was sitting there with his back turned to Harry, writing something.

"Where am I?" Harry finally asked.

The man turned.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Voldemort's hideous laughter echoed through the room. "Welcome to Hell, boy! I hope you'll like it!" Voldemort's face deformed as his eyes turned red and his skin became dark. He was a giant lizard, moving towards Harry's bed. Harry wanted to run away, but couldn't move. He tried to scream, but no sound left his mouth. As the reptile climbed to his bed he rolled over and fell from it.

Harry lay on the stone floor. All he could see was the stone archway that rested on its dais. It seemed somewhat familiar. He stood up and

looked around. Voldemort was standing a few feet on his left in the doorway. Without waiting for a moment Harry waved his wand.

AVADA KEDAVRA!

The green light left the tip of his wand and hit Sirius into his chest. Harry stared in disbelief and pain into Sirius' wide-open accusing eyes as he fell through the Veil.

"The Veil! That's why the room looked familiar!"

"Bravo! I couldn't have done it better myself!" Bellatrix was laughing at him applauding.

Harry stepped backwards as she flew towards him. He stumbled and fell through the Veil followed by her laughter echoing around the room. While he was falling he started choking as a bitter liquid filled his mouth. He swallowed reflexively. Everything went black.

sss

Harry opened his eyes. All he could see was a blurred vision of two heads, one with long bushy hair and the other one with a grey straight hair.

"Harry, Harry. Are you all right?" Hermione asked him worryingly.

Harry cowered in a corner in a paralysis of fear and covered his head with his hands. He looked at them with eyes of a hunted rabbit, shaking.

"Harry. It's me Hermione. You're awake now. Sha gave you the antidote. You'll be fine." He heard Hermione's assuring voice as she tried to calm him.

It took a while before Harry comprehended that he was safe. He felt exhausted. He could still see that grim, horrible place and feel the pain. Not even the Cruciatus curse could compare to that.

"Book! Where's my book?" He started manically searching in his robes. He found it in the inside pocket where it should have been. He

sighed in relief. Hermione and Patricia were whispering something with Noel.

“You know laddie, you should stick with whisky and you’ll never have a hangover like that. Get up now. It’s time to go. You don’t want to miss the plane.” Noel helped him to stand up and get into the suitcase.

Rose was already there lying on the bed. Harry looked at her. He could only hope that the Weasleys would find someone that would help her. He couldn’t tell whether they moved or not, because the room was magically balanced and appeared to everyone inside as a room in a solid, brick-and-mortar house.

Harry opened the book. There was only one paragraph on the page written in red ink.

Worthy you are, my noble reader, of the pages that follow, for a few can go where the Black Ergot takes them and even fewer ever return. But be warned! Should you read the next page you will never be the same, and the one that you had known as yourself will be no more. Think carefully. If you close me now, you will never open me again; turn the page and you will never go back.

Harry stared into the large letters in red that were twinkling in front of his eyes. He couldn’t hear the monotone sound from the aircraft engine. Nor he could see the girl with bushy hair sleeping in her seat with the small suitcase tightly in her arms and a grin on her face. Exhausted after the night spent watching over her best friend, she was dreaming of three Gryffindors drinking their tea in Hagrid’s cabin.

Chapter 13 – The Offer

Remus rushed into Sirius' office.

"They're in Dublin!" He exclaimed, "And they have Rose with them!"

"Dublin?" Sirius was puzzled. "What're they up to?"

"Harry reportedly killed three Aurors, two Quidditch players and sent one to the hospital! There are warrants for him and Hermione."

"He killed three Aurors and two more single-handedly?"

"Not single-handedly. Hermione was with him. It wouldn't be the first time she had killed someone!" Remus retorted bitterly.

"I don't buy it. She's not capable of killing. Whatever happened to Tonks, it wasn't Hermione's doing." Sirius sighed. "I hope I'll find out what really happened."

"Her Patronus looked like a Grim." Remus looked at Sirius questionably. "Does that mean something to you?"

Sirius' heartbeat doubled. He knew what that meant.

It wasn't difficult for Remus to read the expression on his friend's face. "Sirius, you didn't! You promised! You know what's at stake!"

"It's not what you think! Just trust me on this one, will you. I have never felt like this before!"

"Of all the girls in the world, you had to fall in love with the one that killed Tonks!" Remus said accusingly.

"She didn't! I know that she didn't!" Sirius denied.

"How? How do you know that? You believed everything that she said, except that! You're losing it Sirius!" Remus was shouting.

"And what you're going to do about it? At least Hermione isn't a traitor!" Sirius stood up and the two friends faced each other glaring daggers and trembling in anger.

"Now you've done it. This isn't over yet. I'm sick of covering your ass!" Without waiting for an answer Remus left the room slamming the door behind him.

Sirius grinned widely. "Her Patronus looked like a Grim." He repeated. He didn't care about anything else. Since he had met her he was haunted by doubts and jealousy. For the first time in his life he was worried about a girl's feelings about him. The fact that her Patronus looked like Padfoot meant that the memory of him was the happiest thought she could summon.

Sirius sat in his chair repeating: Her Patronus looked like Pad..." He stopped in the middle of the word. "She never saw Padfoot!" He exclaimed in the empty room. Sirius shook his head. "You'll have to explain a lot Hermione when you come back!"

Then he added worriedly "If you ever come back!"

sss

Arthur Weasley stood in the crowd looking like a sore tom. Hermione couldn't hold her laughter. He wore Muggle clothes, but in such a combination of colours that everyone at the airport must have considered him gay.

"Thank goodness I found you Miss Granger. Let's go to my car. I have arranged everything. Rose will be admitted to a hospital immediately." He told her as they walked from the customs.

"But how did you know? And please call me Hermione." Hermione said in a low voice. People were staring at them already and she didn't want to attract any more attention.

"All right. I'll call you Hermione if you call me Arthur. Ryan wrote me all about your journey. Don't ask how. I have no idea how he's doing it, but he found a way to use the Floo network and send me a

message. We have to use a Muggle car since wizards aren't allowed to use a Portkey on Muggle premises."

"You can take Harry out now." Arthur told Hermione once they were in the car. The interior was twice as big as the outside appearance of the car and they were comfortably sitting in the back. The car was auto-guided cruising on the freeway.

Hermione opened the suitcase. Nothing happened. She looked inside. Harry was lying on the floor with his eyes half opened, surrounded by stinky smoke coming from his compound. She quickly cast free-breathing spell and stepped into the suitcase.

sss

"It was about time. I've been waiting for you for quite a while Potter." Voldemort's voice was dominant as always, but not openly hostile.

"Let my sister go!" Harry demanded.

"Oh by all means, but you must do something in return." Voldemort was falsely polite.

"I don't want to make deals with you Riddle!" Harry stepped closer. He didn't feel afraid, just angry. The room was familiar to him for he "visited" Voldemort in it almost regularly. Only now Voldemort could see him and they talked. Somehow it seemed natural and at that moment Harry didn't feel anything strange in that fact.

Voldemort ignored his reply.

"You're reading the Book aren't you? How far did you go? Did she offer you a choice already?"

Yet again, Harry was taken by Voldemort's words.

"Ah, you turned the page, didn't you Potter?" Voldemort looked amused with their conversation. "You see, I'm surrounded by fools. Loyal they are, but still fools. You have your loyal followers as well."

"My friends are loyal because they love me and trust me, not because they're afraid of me!" Harry retorted.

"But Potter, people are afraid of you already. And they are certainly afraid of me. Together, we can accomplish so much. Think of all that power, Potter! You have talent beyond anyone else's except me. I'll be your mentor, your guide." Voldemort talked more and more passionately.

"Did you figure it out yet, Potter? Did you realize what the ultimate magic, the ultimate answer is? Did the Book take you there? Sure she did, she wouldn't have given you the choice to make if she didn't. Do you know where you've been Potter?"

Harry stared at Voldemort in disbelief. How could he know so much? Was the Book yet another trap? Would he regret reading it?

Voldemort looked at Harry in silence and continued.

"You must wonder how I know so much. We are alike Potter. She must have disclosed to you what she disclosed to me, because we're alike! Listen to me now. You can be with your parents again. I can make it so!"

"My parents were kissed! How can you take them back? You're lying!" Harry cried. It wasn't the first time Voldemort wanted him to join him, promising him what he wanted the most. And every time it was equally painful. This time even more, because Harry felt that it was his fault that his parents suffered.

"You don't really expect me to tell you that right now!" Voldemort became hostile again.

"You have three weeks to make up your mind. In the meantime I have taken ten blood traitor's children for every servant of mine that you killed. They are in Azkaban. I lifted the curse, so they know where they are and trust me - they *are* afraid. Should you refuse my offer, they will all be kissed and doomed to eternal suffering together with your parents!" He raised his voice. "Your sister will die eventually, as well, and I'll get you too, sooner or later."

Harry lost his breath. *"Sixty children!"* Ran through his mind Voldemort was looking at him triumphantly. *"He mustn't think I'm weak!"*

"What do you expect me to do in return for their freedom?" Harry asked trying to appear calm.

"I want Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, Minerva McGonagall, Arthur Weasley and Poppy Pomfrey served by you on a silver plate! Their heads would do. I'll leave your Muggle girlfriend alone."

"She's not my girlfriend!" Harry snapped angrily.

"She's irrelevant. You have three weeks Potter! My Dementors are looking forward to having a feast. Either you will disappoint them, or you will disappoint me! Now begone!"

sss

"Damn you Voldemort! You'll never have me! Never, do you hear me?"

Harry shouted at Hermione who was holding his hands trying to calm him down. "It's all right Harry, you're safe now. Mr. Weasley is taking us to the hospital to take care of Rose."

Harry looked around breathing heavily. "He took children! He took children to Azkaban!"

Hermione gasped, "What're you talking about?"

"He took sixty children to Azkaban! They'll be kissed if I don't join him and betray Sirius!"

"OK Harry, you can take Rose out. We're in the hospital now." Arthur interrupted them as his face appeared above their heads.

The hospital was very much like St. Mungo's. Harry had to wait outside the surgery room while several healers examined Rose. From time to time someone came out, just to be back shortly with yet

another healer. Finally after several hours of tense and nervous waiting, an old wizard approached Harry.

"Are you Rose Potter's brother?" He asked.

"Yes. How is she? Can you help her?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes and no. She is under the curse that can be lifted only by the same wizard that cast it, or if he dies. However she's in stable condition, and we can take care of her as long as it's needed until the curse is lifted."

"No! There must be something that can be done!" Harry cried. His worst fear that there was no help for Rose came true.

The old wizard waited until he calmed down a little bit and continued. "I advise you to leave now. She'll be here under another name. Please don't jeopardize her by coming here in case you are followed. As I promised she'll be taken care as long as it's needed." He paused for a moment like he was going to leave them and added "There's something else that we can't explain. The healer from Dublin gave her a potion that was supposed to slow the process down and that's about everything that can be done in cases like this. In other words your sister is supposed to be dying. The fact that she's not would mean that the wizard lifted the curse or died, but it's not the case because the link is still there and we can't break it. It's quite a mystery."

Arthur laid his hand on Harry's shoulder "Let's go Harry."

They went back to the car trying to make certain that nobody followed them.

sss

"Oh Harry, I'm so sorry about Rose!" Molly hugged him as they came into the Weasley's home. "And you must be Hermione! How can I ever thank you for everything that you did for my children!" Molly gave Hermione a bone-crushing hug.

Harry glanced at the room. It was a remote resemblance of the place he knew so well. The clock was still there showing that Charlie was at campus, Percy at his office, Fred and George in their shop, and Ron and Ginny in school. Harry felt relieved. He was eager to see Ginny, but afraid of that at the same time. He wasn't ready yet. He also realized that the Weasleys home wasn't so wondrous for him anymore, after living with his parents and Rose. Actually he found it somewhat tiresome having so many people living in such small space. He was thankful to Hermione for attracting Mrs. Weasley's full attention.

"The children will be home anytime soon and then we can all have one wonderful family lunch. You must be hungry aren't you dear? Some more Butterbeer?" She was all over Hermione.

While Molly's voice faded away Harry thought about his conversation with Voldemort. It's not that he was dreaming that he was there like before ... He was actually there. He was with Voldemort. He wondered whether it was his or Voldemort's doing. Or maybe it took both of them to make the meeting happen.

"Voldemort knows so much. Is it possible that he's right? Are we really alike? After all we do use twin wands. And what did he mean by 'ultimate magic', and 'ultimate question'? I hope Nemesis will come up with some answers."

Finally the "children" arrived, including Fred and George that picked up Ginny and Ron on their way home.

Harry felt a tightening in his chest when he saw Ginny. She wasn't the girl that he remembered. Her eyes once sparkling and full of life were now full of fear and sadness. She spoke quietly almost whispering, avoiding eye contact with everyone except Hermione. Ron was even more silent. He didn't say a word and barely ate anything.

In contrast to them Fred and George were loud as usual. They greeted Harry from the doorstep.

“Harry! Great to see you! We heard everything about you! You’re quite famous over here, you know. It’s a pity we can’t tell anyone that you’re staying with us!”

“That would be enough boys!” Molly snapped at them. “Let’s have lunch.”

However the twins couldn’t resist very long. After a while Fred broke the silence.

“You look so depressed mate. We’re taking you to a party tonight. You need to cheer up!”

“You’ll come too Hermione, won’t you?” George added.

Harry felt anger overtaking him. He clenched his teeth trying to remain calm. Finally he exploded.

“Party! You think I feel like partying? Will you ever grow up? Your friends risk their lives fighting Death Eaters and you’re partying!” he yelled at them. Molly looked at him horrified.

“No! You won’t take them with you! You better get others over here, before they all get killed!”

Harry turned to her. “Voldemort took sixty children to Azkaban Mrs. Weasley. It could have been Ginny and Ron among them. They’ll all be killed if we don’t do something!”

“What are you planning to do?” Arthur asked.

“I dunno yet. I hope Nemesis will. We’ll think of something. But we must go back soon.”

“Everything is blocked.” Arthur said. “There is no way you can go back to Britain right now.”

“Then I’ll fly on my Firebolt!”

“No man can cross the Atlantic ocean flying on a broomstick. How do you think you can maintain concentration three days and three nights in a row? “

“And what about a serpent?” Harry replied. “I’ll fly as Nemesis. And it will take two days on my Firebolt. It’s pre-tuned. Who’s coming with me?”

Hermione couldn’t bear to stay behind and perhaps never see Sirius again. “I’m going.” She said firmly.

“Me too!” The twins exclaimed in unison.

“No, you won’t! I won’t let you!” Molly cried.

“I’m afraid you can’t stop them Molly.” Arthur said quietly. “I knew that this would happen sooner or later. Take care of them you two, will you?” He appealed to Harry and Hermione.

That moment Charlie stormed into the house.

“They sent extradition request for all of us! Voldemort called for revocation of our political asylum in the US! The Aurors are on their way! We must go now!”

“Where’re we going to go?” Molly panicked.

“Charlie you must find Percy before them. I’ll take the others to Canada. You know where you’ll find me. Fred and George will go with Harry. “

“Canada?” Hermione asked.

“Don’t worry. Even if the Canadians get us, it will take months before the provinces decide in whose jurisdiction our matter is and then we’ll request political asylum. By the time all processes are finally done we’ll be long Canadian citizens and Voldemort won’t be able to reach us. “

Charlie looked at the clock, then took the Floo powder and disappeared in the fireplace. Molly was summoning bare necessities, while Arthur was burning sheets of parchment.

Someone was at the door banging. Molly and the children gave Arthur a frightened look.

“Quickly to the basement!” He ordered in a whisper.

They rushed downstairs. Arthur opened the shelf that was hiding the narrow passage. They took broomsticks and some clothes from the shelf. Once everyone was in the tunnel, Arthur blasted the stairs and joined the others. After running through a dark and dusty corridor they surfaced in a small park about one hundred feet behind the house. They were concealed by the bushes, but they could hear Aurors searching their garden. Harry cast the cockpit spell and started transforming. Molly and Arthur were late trying to turn their children’s heads away and Ginny and Ron looked at Harry with their eyes wide open in utter fear.

Aurors left the Weasley’s backyard and were searching the area. Molly hugged Fred and George crying silently.

“Come on Molly, we must go.” Arthur told her gently.

She nodded her head and let the twins go. She and her husband mounted their broomsticks. Arthur took Ron and Molly took Ginny.

“Wait until we take of.” Hermione whispered. She knew what Nemesis could do on the Firebolt.

The next moment, Harry lifted his broomstick above the bushes, and surged forward directly towards the Aurors distracting them from the Weasleys. Even though Harry flew with the cockpit spell, Aurors were no match for Nemesis in the air. He easily evaded their spells and flew towards the ocean.

sss

“You don’t understand Remus! Since their mother died they’re everything I’ve got. I can’t just sit and do nothing!” Moody was in a rage, red faced with his eye bulging.

Remus tried to reason with him. “You can’t rescue them single-handedly!”

“Fine! Let me take volunteers then. Most of us have someone in Azkaban!”

“No volunteers for suicide missions. That’s exactly what they want us to do!”

“Stay out of my way!” Moody roared.

“NO!”

The red light left Moody’s wand that suddenly appeared in his hand and hit Remus in his chest. Remus fell to the floor. Moody bent over him to check whether he was all right. Remus opened his eyes but couldn’t move.

“Sorry Remus. This is something I’ve got to do.”

“*Petrificus Totalis!*” The two men heard a female voice behind Moody. The old Auror fell over Remus paralyzed. Remus stared at Sylvia, his eyes wide open in surprise. He heard that spell cast exactly the same way once before. He’d never forget that night when the sky had fallen on his head as Tonks betrayed him.

“We all put our personal feelings aside.” She repeated his words. “It seems we have to protect the old man from himself.” Sylvia helped Remus to his feet. Even though Moody was in a rage he made sure not to hit Remus too hard.

“He’s the best Auror that ever lived.”

“I know.” Sylvia replied.

“Let’s call Sirius and Minerva.” Remus pulled himself together still baffled with her appearance and his confusing feelings.

Chapter 14- High Council

It was dawn over the North Atlantic. The ocean was as grey as the sky above it. Harry, or Nemesis, as he liked to call himself, had no problem stirring the Firebolt. Oh yes, Nemesis could fly as long as needed, without blinking an eye. Harry was thinking about the book, Voldemort and what to do next.

He remembered the page he had turned after the warning. It took him less than three seconds to make that decision. He knew he had to go on. Now he recollected the words he had read.

“Everything you do from now on will be your choice. It will be the choice between evil and good. Other people do not have the power to make such a decision very often, but you will. You will see places that others cannot see; you will meet what causes the worst fear of all. You will go where no one would want to go. Only you will tell when to stop and how far to go. The farther you go, the greater your desire will be to go beyond. But every time there will be the choice. Choose wisely my noble reader, for what has been done cannot be undone!”

“Good and evil!” Harry hissed bitterly. “How good could it be to sacrifice sixty innocent children? How good could it be to join the most evil man in the world? What other choices do I have?”

He remembered the pages he read after leaving the hospital.

“Worry not my noble reader! Your destiny is your own. I never told the same twice! You will do what you are destined to do, like all the others before you. And as others did, you will learn what your heart desires, even if you do not know it yet. Listen to your heart, but follow your fear. For what we fear the most is to lose what we love the most. Remember, follow your fear. And in the meantime...cheer up!”

“Cheer up?” Harry repeated. “What the heck did she mean by that?”

He thought of the words that the Healer in the hospital told him.

“...your sister is supposed to be dying. The fact that she’s not would mean that the wizard lifted the curse or died, but that’s not the case because the link is still there and we can’t break it.”

“Of course!” He exclaimed.

The loud hissing woke up Hermione, who turned on her seat and fell back to sleep.

“He must be weaker because I killed one of his Horcruxes! I’ve got to find the others. Every time I kill a Horcrux I kill a bit of him and make him weaker and his magic as well. That’s why Hermione’s Patronus worked. The Dementors’ ward is weakening too. And Rose will get better after every Horcrux I kill.” For the first time in quite a while he felt good and confident. He knew what to do and where to go.

“It’s good to be a serpent. It’s good to be Nemesis. Thank you Athena!”

An hour or so later Fred woke up in his seat stretching his arms and legs and yawning. His movement woke up George who turned to his brother.

“Watch your legs! I’m not your pillow!”

“Yeah? Since when?”

Hermione opened her eyes. “Do you have to shout at each other every morning?”

Hermione’s robes were wrinkled, her hair was a total mess and she had an impression in her cheek from sleeping on her arm over night.

The twins burst into laughter.

“I don’t see what’s so funny!”

“That’s because you don’t have a mirror!”

Harry hissed and flicked his tongue. His body that wrapped around the Firebolt twitched a little bit. That was more than enough to silence the twins. He smiled inside, *“It’s good to be a snake!”*

The Firebolt was flying at incredible speed carried by tempestuous gale. Looking below they could see giant waves surging up like they wanted to reach their broomstick.

"I have to think of something to save those children. I need someone who knows Azkaban. Someone like Mad-Eye. But he'll be with Sirius, and Sirius will never let us go!" Harry knew that he couldn't just walk into the Headquarters and take Mad-Eye with him. He decided to get some "sleep" and gather information.

In the meantime Hermione used the opportunity to learn as much as possible about the Resistance from the twins. It wasn't a difficult task. As a matter of fact, they were practically racing to see who was going to tell her more.

"So they decided to leave a small group in the Forbidden Forest and most of the senior survivors, like our father went into exile to lobby for our cause from there. Mum didn't let us join the Resistance." Fred told her.

"What happened to the Order?" Hermione asked. Nobody in the Headquarters wanted to talk about it.

"Ah, so you know about the Order! After Dumbledore died, the High Council decided that it was a much-closed group of privileged elite; something like the Death Eaters on the other side. They thought that 'Resistance' was more appealing to a broader audience." Fred responded.

"Of course you understand that some people didn't like it at all." George added.

"We have our informants everywhere, including the Ministry, Hogwarts and even among Death Eaters." George continued.

"But Voldemort has moles in the Resistance as well!" Hermione bitterly exclaimed. "What about your education?" She continued with questions.

“Yes what about it?” The twins laughed. Then George replied, “Most of the Hogwarts students who escaped capture had private lessons, and some went to foreign schools.”

“Dad told us about your counter-spell. That was so cool! We can all do that now.” Fred continued.

“Yes, it was easy for Percy. In order to evoke the feeling of love, all he’s got to do is to think of himself!” George laughed.

“What else did you learn?”

“Well, most of the stuff from Mad-Eye’s list including the Killing Curse.” George replied.

“But we have some of our own! It’s amazing what you can do when you don’t have to learn Herbology or history! Watch this.”

“*Illusimago!*” George flicked his wand and suddenly Hermione was looking at triplets instead of twins. It was only by clothes that she could tell that there were two images of George. After a few seconds the image started fading away.

“We still have to figure out how to make it more permanent.” Fred added.

“Can you do it without somatic evocation?” Hermione asked. Fred flicked his wand and the copy of him appeared besides Hermione.

Harry didn’t listen to them anymore. He spotted land in the distance. He had to decide where to go. After a minute of hesitating he turned south. He didn’t want to face Sirius and the others just yet. The Weasleys hideout would serve them for a few days. Just enough to make plans for the next move.

It was past midnight when they landed at the small clearing in the forest near the hideout. It took two days and one night of constant flying to get there, faster than they expected because of the gale. Harry flicked his forked tongue and after sensing nothing suspicious, he transformed back into a human.

“Harry mate, you made it! How’re we going to get to the Headquarters from here?” Fred asked excitedly. He seemed the most eager of all of them to get there.

“We’re not.” Harry replied.

“What do you mean by that?”

“We’ll keep a low profile for a while in your family hideout. Nobody knows we’re here. I have reasons to believe that there’s another traitor in the Resistance. I don’t want Voldemort to know I’m back just yet.” Harry hoped that the twins would buy his story.

“Well let’s go then.” George nodded.

The hideout interior was in the same mess they made when Hermione was trying the wands. The boys hardly noticed it obviously not bothered. Hermione sighed and promised herself that she would tidy up the place the first thing in the morning.

Harry collapsed into a bedroll. He decided not to use the compound with Black Ergot before regaining full strength. There were places to visit before he would need to use it anyways. He learnt in time to sense when and where something interesting to him was happening. Then he had to go quickly into a dream and “visit” the place. This time he couldn’t sense anything and thought he could have some rest. Anyways if something came up he would simply continue dreaming and “go” there.

sss

It was early morning. Harry stood in the corner of the main room at the Headquarters. About two dozen witches and wizards gathered around the long massive table. Their faces were very serious and Harry could sense high tension among them. Besides the Resistance leadership he recognized Crouch senior, Cornelius Fudge, Nicolas Flamel and a few other senior wizards. Fudge sat at the top of the table flanked by Sirius on his right and Remus on his left side.

“I told you Remus. We can’t discuss it now. We’ll address that matter later. And I don’t want to hear a word about it today. Is that clear?”

Fudge looked pretty nervous. Talking to Remus didn't make him feel any better.

Remus glared daggers at Sirius, but sat quickly into his chair.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice." Fudge began. "Since most of the members are present I declare this High Council session open." He paused for a moment looking at the silent audience. "This is the most difficult moment for us since Dumbledore died. We have sixty children imprisoned in Azkaban and nobody knows what's going to happen to them. There is an international warrant for Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and most of the Weasleys. They all escaped arrest and now we have lost sympathy and support in America and Europe. You Know Who always wanted to portray us as criminals and murderers, and now thanks to little Potter and Moody," he raised his voice looking at the old Auror who was sitting aside tied up and with a scarf in his mouth, "he finally succeeded. The High Council must find a way to minimize the damage and reassure our allies abroad that they both acted on their own as 'lone wolves' and not directed by the High Command. Of course we'll have to justify the killing and abductions that happened on Hogwarts grounds."

Sirius jumped from his seat. "How dare you?" he roared. "We risk our lives every day fighting the Death Eaters, and now we're supposed to apologise for being successful!"

"Sirius Black, please sit down! You'll have an opportunity to speak on your turn. One more incident like this and you'll be watching the session like Auror Moody!" Crouch senior reprimanded Sirius in a stern voice. Moody looked at him furiously. Harry didn't know why, but understood that there had had to be very strong disagreement regarding the latest events that had snapped Moody and caused him to fly into a rage.

McGonagall raised her wand and after being permitted to speak she started.

"Although we all agree that the discipline and obeying orders from High Command is essential, I must remind you that in war the unexpected happens very often, and we have to react to any threat

and seize every opportunity. Sometimes we simply don't have enough time to think of all aspects of our actions."

"Thank you Minerva for reminding us that we're in the middle of a war. I'd almost forgotten." Fudge replied sarcastically.

"You have no right to talk like that to Minerva!" Sirius lost his nerve and jumped from his seat again. "You slimy bas..." but he was silenced in the middle of the sentence struck by spell. Harry couldn't see who cast it, but it obviously took speech ability from Sirius.

"I must ask you to hand me over your wand Mr Black!" Crouch said coldly. "You are under arrest."

Sirius hesitated. Then Crouch added softly "Please Sirius, don't make it worse."

Sirius slowly took his wand and gave it to Crouch.

"You may stay in the room pending the end of this session, and then you'll be escorted into your quarters where you'll remain under house arrest until your case is held before the High Council."

Sirius furiously looked at Remus mouthing "Are you happy now?"

Remus avoided looking him into the eye.

"Let us proceed now." Fudge continued with the session. "The commander's responsibility, errors and misconduct will be addressed later. We have to decide how to respond to the latest events."

One wizard from the former Ministry was allowed to speak. "We must release hostages and appeal to the international community to intensify diplomatic pressure on You Know Who to release the children."

McGonagall, who was obviously the only one from the Resistance allowed to speak, responded

“Shouldn’t we also consider a rescue mission in case that You Know Who doesn’t comply; which is by the way the almost certain outcome?”

“They expect us to do exactly that Minerva. We can’t send our boys and girls into a certain death.”

“Then what’s the point of releasing the prisoners? All three of them are his faithful followers and Death Eaters. They killed and betrayed many good people.”

“The Ministry presented that quadriplegic Quidditch player, Oliver Wood to the public as an innocent victim of terrorism. We must demonstrate that we’re not savages!”

The buzz rippled through the room as everybody had a comment on this.

“Order, order!” Fudge raised his voice. “Nicolas Flamel is called upon to speak!”

The buzz silenced as everybody stopped talking and turned to Flamel.

“It is true that the prisoners deserve to be put on trial for their deeds. Unfortunately, the harsh reality gives us little choice but to release them. However, Mulciber and Nott are also wanted in France. I propose we hand them over to the French authorities. Everyone will think that we acted on the behalf of the French. Of course they will officially deny any involvement, and of course nobody will believe them. But the blame for the events on Hogwarts grounds will fall on them and not on us. It will cast a shadow of doubt on all other accusations against the Resistance and we can use it to our end to regain the position we had before the incidents. Regrettably it would mean that Slughorn will get away for now, but that is the price we have to pay.”

Many in the room nodded their heads in approval.

“Agreed. Let us put this on vote. Everyone who is for releasing prisoners the way proposed by Nicolas Flamel and denouncing of violence raise his or her hand and say ‘Aye’.”

Harry watched in disbelief as all except four raised their hands and said "Aye".

"Bastard. He used Flamel's proposal to sneak in the denouncing of violence, and it worked!" Harry was yet again disgusted by Fudge's politicking.

"The session is adjourned. Escort the detainees to their quarters."

sss

Harry woke up. It was almost noon and nobody was in the hideout. He tried to comprehend what he had just witnessed.

"Remus turned against Sirius! I can't believe it. It must be because of Hermione!" Then he thought of Fudge. *"What a rat he is. I hope he'll meet Nemesis one day! Or night!"*

Then he took a piece of parchment.

Dear Athena,

things are getting out of control. I have to meet you tonight. Please meet me behind the stables one hour after midnight.

HP

He summoned his Patronus, attached the message and sent it.

The twins and Hermione finally arrived.

"Where've you been?" Harry demanded.

"We had to see our house."

"Bastards! Did you see what they've done to it?"

"What if you were seen? Did you check that nobody followed you? What were you thinking?" He asked angrily.

"Hey chill out mate! Of course we were careful. We're not idiots!" George retorted.

"You're so paranoid. You should relax and cheer up!" Fred added.

"Cheer up!" Harry exclaimed. "Why do you think I should ..." Harry stopped in the middle of the sentence thinking intensively.

"That's brilliant! Yes! We should all cheer up!"

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked.

"Dementors!"

"Dementors?"

"Dementors. You see, they feed themselves with our fear, our misery. That's what they eat when they suck souls from their victims. If the sorrow is food for them, then happiness and joy must be poison. Don't you realise? We can destroy them!"

"You mean to destroy the Dementors by using the Cheering charm?" Hermione exclaimed.

"What were you smoking dude? I wouldn't come near Dementors for the world!" George said.

"Well, if we want to rescue those children from Azkaban, we'll have to come near them."

Hermione looked at him with wide eyes. "You do mean it, don't you?" She realised that he was determined to do it.

"Of course I do. We have to find a way to empower the spell like you empowered the shield."

They looked at him totally unconvinced.

"Cornelius Fudge, Crouch senior and others imprisoned Moody and Sirius. Even Remus turned against Sirius. They want to release Slughorn and denounce the violence. It all happened this morning while you were *enjoying* your walk." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "It's almost certain that they'll disband the Resistance and continue their 'Political Struggle' whatever that means. Don't you understand?"

It's up to us! If we don't save the hostages, no one else will and they'll all be kissed. If you're not with me, tell me now! I've got to know who I can count on!"

Hermione was taken by surprise. Harry never gave speeches. Certainly not like that one. He stood in the middle of the room firmly looking them into the eye. He seemed all but confident that they would follow him no matter what. Hermione thought of Sirius. She wanted to go to the Headquarters. Oh yes, she wanted so much to see him and stand by his side and tell him she'll be with him to the end. Hermione bit her lips. What if that night was just a moment of passion to him? After all, he was 'prince charming'. What if...

"You selfish bitch!" She yelled at herself in her thoughts. *"There're things greater than your relationship that never was!"*

"I'm with you Harry!" She heard herself say. It was like somebody else was talking.

Harry grinned at her. "I knew you would."

"You know brother, if we make it, we'll be legends!" George said to his brother.

"Yeah! We will!" Fred responded with his eyes glowing.

"We're with you, too!" They exclaimed.

"We can't call ourselves the Resistance." Hermione remarked.

"Yeah, I know. We'll bring light. We'll be the Lightbringers." Harry said and waved his wand. The blue light sparked from it and engraved the lightening bolt in the floor. "And this will be our symbol!"

sss

Harry was sliding down the wall. It was the same place filled by the living skeletons and rats that he visited when he used the compound for the first time. Only now he didn't feel the pain and he could see where he was. The place was huge or better enormous in size and looked like a dungeon prison only without guards. There were no

windows on the walls. By his scent he would tell it was deep under the surface of the Earth. Fortunately for Nemesis the air was warm, but humid and stale. To his surprise not only he didn't feel disgusted by the rats, but actually hungry like after smelling fresh toast in the morning. Resisting the urge to chase the rodents, he continued towards the corridor. He followed the breeze he felt at his last visit. Only this time he could see the edge of the well he fell into before. The walls were rough enough to slide down without falling. He remembered what happened and the feeling of fear and horror he felt when he had fell. And that was exactly what he was going to do. To follow his fears. As he advanced down he felt the rising pressure and tightening in his throat. A sudden feeling of desperation would strike him from time to time like gusts of gale.

"I should feel fear, not desperation." Harry thought. He was confused but didn't stop. The more he slid down the more he was aware that thousands of thoughts and memories filled his head. And they were all packed with desperation. At some point he thought he was losing his mind. For a moment, panic seized him and he started going back. Harry had to summon all his willpower to pull himself together and continue downwards repeating the words from the book

"Follow your fears..."

He continued. By then he was surrounded by unnatural fog, so dense that he could hardly breathe. He lost every count of time and where he was. Occasionally he thought he heard some voices or scratching nails on the wall. He flicked his tongue but could sense nothing but the fog. As the voices in his head multiplied, the feeling of desperation became overwhelming and he was reaching the breaking point when all of it suddenly disappeared completely just to be replaced with equally overwhelming feeling of true happiness. Then he heard only one voice. Actually he didn't *hear* it; he *felt* it. It was the voice Harry could never forget.

END OF PART ONE